Business process management (BPM) has been recognized as one of the most pressing issues in contemporary management practice (e.g., [1]). One part of BPM is concerned with the design of business processes, a task the importance of which is expressed in the following quote: “No matter how hard individuals work, they cannot overcome a flawed process design, much less the burden of no design at all” [2, p. 55]. Given the technological nature of BPM, the design of business processes is the design of means to ends. Following the famous dictum “The means justify the ends” we can conclude that ultimately the goals we try to achieve with business processes should determine the features of the means, i.e., the design of business processes. However, the goals we usually try to achieve with business processes are not terminal ends. Rather, those goals are part of a network of means–ends relationships which rarely exhibit an ideal hierarchical structure of higher-level and lower-level goals. Thus, the adequacy of business process design should not be solely based on the goals to be achieved with business processes. We believe that contemporary conceptualizations of the adequacy of business process design have too limited a horizon and cannot accommodate the complexities of networks of means–ends relationships business processes are part of. Consequently, we advocate the broadening of the horizon as a first step towards the development of more realistic and viable conceptualizations of adequacy of business process design. But what does “adequate design” mean?

The adequacy of a design can be understood as the quality of the instrumental relationship between design features and the goals the designed artifact is meant to serve. However, such a conceptualization is only viable if we can safely assume that the respective goals are terminal, i.e., they are neither sub-goals nor goals standing in conflicting or contradictory relationships to other goals. In the context of BPM, the assumption of a simple means–ends relationship as determinant of the adequacy of business process design is hardly warranted given the also political nature of business organizations (e.g., [3]), which finds its expression in the often incompatible interests of stakeholders. Yet even if more complex means–end relationships are taken into consideration, the conceptualization of “adequate design” presupposes the possibility of the adequacy of the designed artifact in the first place. With other words, in the con-

### On Adequacy of Business Process Design

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text of BPM the adequacy of business processes as managerial technology is presupposed. However, the frequent inadequacy of the understanding of organizations solely in terms of formal structures (e.g., business processes) has already been recognized early in the 20th century (e.g., [4; 5])—an insight that led to the emergence of the field of organizational behavior and eventually the vast heterogeneous field of contemporary management and organization theory. And, it was the foremost guru of BPM himself, who, in an early critical reflection on a predecessor of BPM [6], encouraged researchers and practitioners to look beyond the formal notion of business organizations and processes—to make sure that they do not forget people again. In a personal communication in 2005 he explicitly mentioned works in industrial anthropology—hinting at the fact that not abstract stakeholders but real human beings should be the ultimate points of reference for the determination of design adequacy. Taking this view into consideration, the concept of “design adequacy” must necessarily be relational and thus relative: Adequate design is always adequate for someone, at a certain time, under certain circumstances. The traditional notion of “design adequacy” reifies “adequacy” and can thus not take the human factor into consideration. Consequentially, the determination of design adequacy needs to be relative to the human factor. Design adequacy is thus not only contextual but also local and contingent (e.g., [7]). Hence, the challenge in the determination of design adequacy is not to be seen in the determination of the quality of the instrumental relationship between design features and the goals the designed artifact is meant to serve. Rather, the challenge is to be seen in the determination of the scope of the design adequacy. It is obvious that the change of scope that comes with the change from a reified to a relational notion of “design adequacy” is quite dramatic, since we then have to deal with the idiosyncrasies of concrete human beings instead of the uniformity of abstract stakeholders. Incorporating, for example, anthropological ideas in the determination of design adequacy will make us realize that design decisions have implications for the well-being of human beings, their colleagues, and their families. The resurgent interest in socio-technical design in the healthcare domain (e.g., [8]) might serve us well as a highly contemporary source of inspiration.

The reified notion of “design adequacy” presupposes a unidirectional causal relationship between design and utility of the designed artifact. This is an expression of traditional technological determinist thought. The notion of technological determinism has been criticized ever since (e.g., [9]) and we can safely postulate that the notion of the “social determination of technology” appears to be the more viable conceptualization of the relationship between technology and humans. This notion is also in line with our above stated claim regarding the relational nature of “adequacy”. Conclusively, means (just like methods) cannot serve as guarantors for the adequacy of the design of some artifact. We need to re-conceptualize “design adequacy” and ask ourselves: Under what circumstances is a design adequate? From this question we can derive a secondary one: “How do we achieve circumstances in which a design is adequate?” Those questions clearly suggest that we can improve the adequacy of the design of business processes not only by changing the design, but also by changing the circumstances—ceteris paribus. Perusal of contemporary literature on business process design reveals that the latter avenue towards achieving design adequacy has—to our admittedly limited knowledge—so far been completely ignored.
Our critique of the reified notion of “adequate design” is meant to be a challenge of traditional thinking in BPM. With our conceptualization of a relational and thus relative notion of “adequate design” we want to overcome self-imposed constraints in the theorizing of business process design. Our re-conceptualization of the notion of “adequate design” is based on the assumption that business process design can only be adequate if the concept of business process is adequate in the first place. Hence, the adequacy of business process design is first and foremost a conceptual issue that needs to be dealt with from a multiplicity of perspectives. Implications of our thoughts on adequate business process design for research policy in the area of BPM need to be elaborated in future work.

References