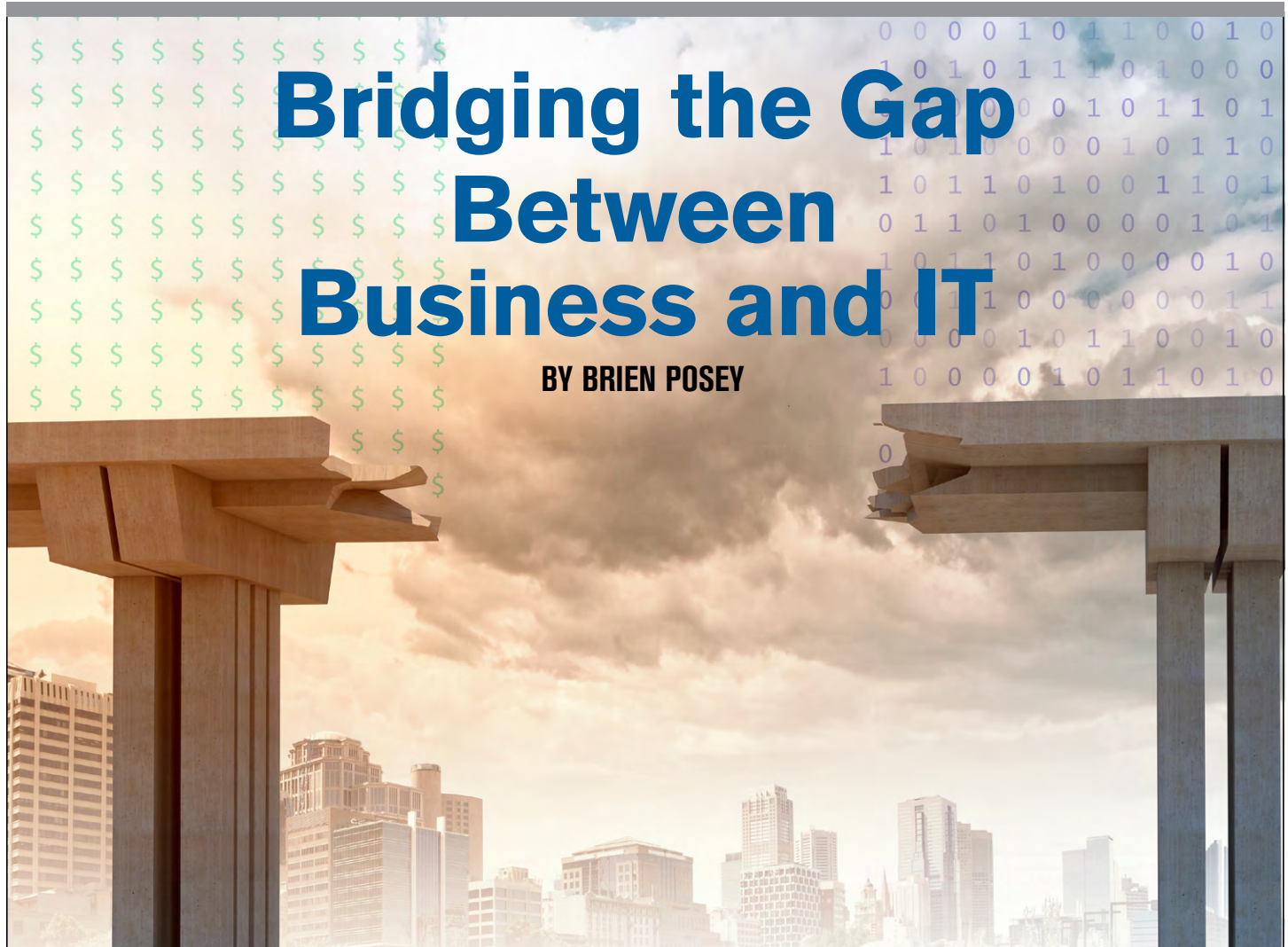


Application Development Trends



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Bridging the Gap Between Business and IT



Bridging the Gap Between Business and IT

BY BRIEN POSEY

For many organizations, the path to agile operations is fraught with challenges.

Business environments are changing. The volume and velocity of Internet-borne information is affecting every aspect of the way business is done. IDC Estimates that by 2020, business transactions on the internet- business-to-business and business-to-consumer – will reach 450 billion per day. The flood of new data is increasingly driving purchase decisions as ‘wisdom of the crowd’ becomes ever more pervasive. Success or failure is often dictated by consumer response to these new information flows, such as trends and ‘likes’ on social media.

To succeed in such a rapidly changing environment, businesses must be agile. They must respond quickly as markets, customer needs and even regulations change faster than ever before. For many organizations, however, the path to agile operations is fraught with challenges. Chief among those is a long-standing disconnect between the business units that hold the profit and loss for product lines and the IT departments that deliver the applications upon which the business depends.

Business people may have trouble conveying business requirements to IT people in a way that they can understand.

Businesses that survive and prosper in this new world will be those that have learned to bridge the gap between business and IT departments, and enabled IT to become a strategic asset rather than a cost center. Needless to say, this is a tall order, but technologies do exist that can help to bridge that gap. This whitepaper examines some possible approaches and technologies.

The Disconnect Between Business and IT

Much of the disconnect between business and IT can be attributed to the fact that business and IT speak completely different languages. Although it is easy to scoff at the notion of a language barrier, actual dictionaries exist for both business terms and IT terms. The fact that the two groups each have a unique vocabulary can make it challenging for business and IT to work together in a meaningful way.

Business people for example, may have trouble conveying business requirements to IT people in a way that they can understand. Even if IT is able to decipher the business's needs, the IT staff might find it difficult to present a complex solution in a way that business people can understand.

The key to solving business challenges is for technical and business people to learn to speak a common language and to be able to collaborate effectively. Although establishing an intelligible dialog between business and IT might seem like a pipe dream, there are collaborative solutions that can help the two groups to communicate more effectively in spite of their differing backgrounds.

Bringing IT and Business Together

The key to bringing business and IT together is understanding where the differences lie and then embracing those differences in a way that takes advantage of each group's strengths. Although vocabulary is a major contributing factor in the disconnect between business and IT, the differences in vocabulary stem from differences in areas of expertise.

Although some business people are technology savvy, information technology does not tend to be a core competency for business people. As such, business people may have unrealistic expectations of what technology can accomplish, how long it will take to put a solution in place, or how much a solution will cost. This can lead business people to make unrealistic IT requests.

Conversely, there are some IT people who have a business background, but most specialize in technology – not business. This means that IT professionals may be highly proficient in technology, but may not completely understand the business, its processes, or the challenges that the organization is facing.

These differences in backgrounds can lead to frustrations for both groups. Business people may sometimes make requests of the IT staff without realizing the impact that those requests will have on existing priorities or the complexity of delivering them. For example, the seemingly simple task of extending an application to display an additional field of information might require an interface to a remote system.

A collaborative approach can make life easier for business and IT alike.

IT on the other hand, understands that their job is to use technology to solve business problems, and therefore wants to accommodate the request, but may be unsure of how to do so when burdened with other priorities and a dwindling budget. If IT were to fully understand the business reasoning behind the request, they might sometimes be able to offer alternative solutions that meet the business objective, but in a less complex way.

A collaborative approach can make life easier for business and IT alike. The goal behind such an effort should be to use a combination of IT resources and business expertise to turn manual business processes into automated processes, with the goal of using automation to improve business agility.

How Collaboration Can Help

But how can business and IT come together when the two groups have completely different backgrounds and speak different languages? Perhaps the best ways of achieving the organization's business automation goals is to let each group focus on what it is good at, and then use a middleware solution to bridge the gap.

Business people can contribute to this process by using simple tools to document business processes and business workflows. Once these processes and workflows have been documented in a standardized way, the IT team can build the business logic that automates the processes and workflows.

Important Questions to Answer

Although the concept of documenting and then automating business processes might sound simple in theory, business automation can only be achieved when business and IT sit down with one another and work out specific details. Documenting business processes and workflows is only the first step.

While collaborating on the automation of business processes, the business people must make their needs known to the IT department, beyond simply providing them with a flow chart of business processes. For example, the IT team will need to know how the business people want the automated process to be exposed. Will IT need to develop a custom application, or is there an existing application that can simply be extended?

One of the most basic questions that must be answered is that of what additional information will be needed in order to make the business logic work.

These collaborative sessions should also be used as a way for the IT team to get their questions answered as well. Business people who do not have a technical background may assume that once a business process has been outlined, IT can immediately begin writing code. Although a documented business process establishes business logic, it does not translate directly into business automation. IT will almost always need some additional information in order to fully automate a process.

One of the most basic questions that must be answered is that of what additional information will be needed in order to make the business logic work. Imagine a financial services company that wants to determine what interest rate to charge their customers. While the formula for calculating the interest rate might be relatively simple, there are things that IT will need to know besides just the formula. For example, they might need to know the prime rate or the customer's credit score.

This brings up another important question that must be answered. In order to automate a business process, IT will need to know where the current data currently resides and how it can be accessed. If for example, it is determined that a process's business logic cannot work without supplying a credit score, then the next logical question is where to get the credit score. Similarly, IT must determine whether an automated business process can stand on its own, or if it will need to interface with other business processes or workflows. As the pieces of the puzzle come together, IT will also need to make a decision as to whether it is better to build a custom solution from scratch or if it might be more efficient and cost effective to use a middleware solution.

Working through a collaborative process in which IT asks questions, business people provide answers, and IT builds a solution has a number of different benefits. The most obvious benefit is that such an approach allows various processes to be automated.

Another benefit however, is that working through such a process can help to build good will within the organization. By meeting with IT and supplying them with the information that they need, business people will begin to get a clearer picture of how IT operates and may gain a deeper appreciation for the hard working IT staff. Similarly, for the IT staff, the chance to interact with business people while developing a solution helps IT to better understand the way that the business functions, which in turn helps them to provide better, more effective solutions to business problems.

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Taking it to the Next Level

Although business process automation is undeniably important, it is important also to remember that automation is not the ultimate goal. It is only a starting point. The larger goal is to use technology in a way that improves business agility and efficiency in a quantifiable way. This is where middleware can really help.

Suppose for example that you have recently automated a complex business process. How can you tell if that process is working efficiently? Automation alone is task oriented. It tells you nothing about efficiency. However, middleware solutions exist that offer simulation capabilities. These simulations allow the organization to experiment with various “what if” scenarios in an effort to achieve optimum efficiency. Similarly, it is possible to analyze real business data, not just simulated business activity.

Of course with any business process it is important to have a clear picture of what is happening, and this is where middleware really shines. Middleware can be used to provide direct insight into current conditions through a series of dashboards that graphically convey real time business data. Being able to visually digest real time business data can help the organization’s business people to spot trends that they may be able to capitalize on by adjusting certain business processes.

As previously stated, the primary goal behind working toward business process automation is to make the business more agile so

that it is able to more quickly adapt to market trends. One of the most important benefits of using a middleware product is that middleware can help to make your automated workflows much more flexible. A middleware solution can make it easier to restructure a complex process in response to a perceived inefficiency or in response to changing business conditions or goals. Clearly the same cannot be said for a custom application that has been built from the ground up, since restructuring such an application can take months to complete.

Conclusion

Market conditions are changing more rapidly than ever before. A business' success is largely tied to its agility; the speed with which it can respond to changing trends.

One way that organizations can dramatically increase their agility is to base custom business applications around middleware solutions.

One way that organizations can dramatically increase their agility is to base custom business applications around middleware solutions, such as Red Hat's JBoss BPM Suite. JBoss can make it easy to restructure complex business processes on demand, which is something that cannot easily be achieved with standard business applications. For example, the Swedish Board of Agriculture deployed JBoss and found a threefold increase in performance over their previous process. Marcus Milerup of the Swedish Board of Agriculture was quoted as saying "we quickly realized the benefits of flexibility and manageability of JBoss as we easily could set up, manage, and change rules more swiftly." *

Furthermore, JBoss BPM Suite can give business people real time insight into current market trends and critical business processes, while also offering an impressive array of data analytics features. All of these capabilities combine to provide better situational awareness for those tasked with running the organization.

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* <http://www.redhat.com/resourcelibrary/case-studies/swedish-board-agriculture-sjv-efficiency-red-hat-jboss-brms>

