

Bringing Roles to the Glass, One Function at a Time

A different approach to increasing workplace productivity

The world of business technology is regaining its focus. After five years of “wandering in the IT forest”, a new direction seems to be emerging. The emphasis had shifted from seller driven software to developing buyer driven solutions. We are no longer as interested in what the technology sector wants to sell as we are in how vendors can help us solve our business problems. Businesses are refocusing on increasing productivity at the worker level, while at the same time, continuing to reduce costs. According to the October 2005 CIO Insight Business Process Improvement Survey, process improvement has emerged as the top business priority for IT organizations with improving productivity and reducing costs as the most common goal. Eighty-three percent of the respondents want to deliver critical information to employees *while they are carrying out the company's business*.

The new direction is clearly to bring individual *roles* to the *glass*, one *function* at a time, a change that, for some companies, will not only trigger a significant change in the business process, but also in the IT department. However, before we state our case about this change, we need to define what we mean by ‘roles’, ‘the glass’ and ‘functions’?

Roles are what humans play or do as part of the business process. On the assembly line, for example, we have the role of parts supplier, assembler, and inspector to name a few. In the front office we have the customer service representative and the accounts payable clerk.

The glass is the interface point between humans and the information systems. The glass could be a desk top monitor, laptop, PDA, cell phone, barcode scanner, or custom tablet.

Function is what humans or systems do as part of the business process. Delivering parts, placing a customer order, creating a design, and sending an invoice are examples of the myriad of functions that are needed to run a business.

Driving Forces

There are always forces behind any change that either cause a shift in direction or help guide the movement once a shift has been made. The roots of this latest change go back to the 1990's with the Enterprise Software frenzy. ERP systems were hot and everyone had to have one. The turn of the 21st century brought us the Internet boom and bust as we started to move from applications mode to information movement mode. Instant access to and the broad sharing of information moved to the top of our wish list.

While there were moments of some success, the IT industry, in general, was stuck in a period of transition until early in 2004 when the economy began to rebound and the use of newer tools and technologies started to take hold. It was during this period that technology decision making started its move away from the IT department and into the front office.

The CFO and CEO, wondering about the lack of ROI for their previous investments, were starting to become more involved. As a result, businesses began reorganizing their IT thinking into the following four categories – Application Downsizing, Software to Solution Shift, Architectural Shift, and Strategic Management Shift.

Application Downsizing.

In the heyday of Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), company after company jumped on the ERP bandwagon. Everyone wanted one of these multi-million dollar systems. There were two primary attractions – the business process could be consolidated into a single, coordinated application that would “bring the business together”, and with everyone buying an ERP system, those who had yet to make the ERP decision did not want to be left behind.

The days of block-buster applications are over. Senior management does not have the budget or the desire for mega-projects and their cost overruns. They want to proceed at a much slower rate with measurable ROI steps along the way. And they don't want to buy what they do not need.

Software-to-Solutions Shift.

Infrastructure, enterprise applications, and desktop software have matured to a point where they are now considered a commodity. Every business has them in some form, so they are no longer considered a differentiator. With the focus shifting to solving business problems and less on features and capabilities of products, software, by itself, is no longer the answer. It is how it is applied that is making the difference. This means that solutions have become the new direction.

It is no longer about what software can do, but what it can do to improve my business process and functions. Products are being replaced by solutions – combinations of product, product customizations and services that focus on implementing a specific business process. The solutions enable a company to focus on refining their business processes, and to drive more effective business processes through automation, checks and balances, and reporting.

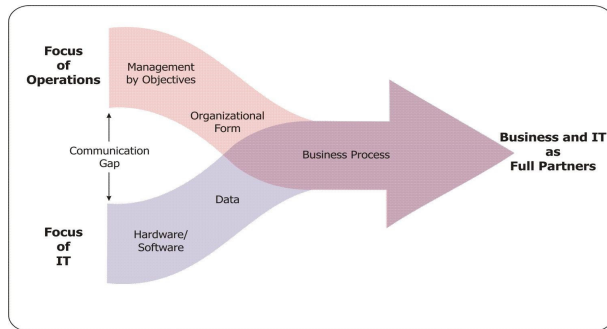
Architectural Shift.

Often it is not what you do, but how you do it that makes the difference. Increasingly, the architecture of your infrastructure and business systems is the critical factor in building a successful business. Over the past ten years the information technology industry has been taking down the barriers that surround proprietary business applications and replacing the walls with industry standards and rules-based architectures for communication and data exchange.

Best practices, such as SOA, Web Services, and XML, are delivering the promise of technology and business process interoperability. Today's challenge is speed and flexibility, challenges that require rules, tools, and architectural frameworks.

IT and Business Management Merge.

During the 90's, IT rose to a place of strategic importance for many companies, but then quickly fell out of favor as the economy slowed and business executives realized that the software products were not delivering advertised business advantages. Five years later, IT is making a comeback as a vehicle for strategic advantage. With this shift in position, IT managers are actively learning to identify business processes and appropriate technologies that increase the efficiency of those processes. Now, IT and Business management are in lock-step heading in the same direction.



It's All About Roles and Functions

The velocity of business and the demands of the consumer are requiring new levels of responsiveness. We are not just talking about customer service and the shipping department, but managers and knowledge workers through the entire process, inside and outside the organization. Everyone involved has a role to fulfill and functions to perform. Any breakdown in either responsibility will have an effect on the performance of the overall process. The "sensitivity" of our process to changes, planned or otherwise, is greater than ever. Roles and function really matter

The challenge is to learn and understanding the business processes and functions, what roles are contained within those processes, and how multiple business processes and roles interact in driving productivity, and therefore revenue. Those companies that are successful at understanding and enabling their business processes via technology will be well positioned to succeed.

Rethinking the Philosophy

But how does one go about enabling their business processes via technology? Not by implementing a larger ERP system, but rather by developing a long-term architectural roadmap of where you need to go, and then taking small and measured steps towards that endpoint. With individual roles and functions in mind (not departments!), carefully redefine the entire processes, adding new steps as appropriate and eliminating those that are no longer needed. Then use technology to bring those roles to the glass, one function at a time. Use rules and architectures that will allow rapid development and change, for that is the nature of today's business.

Doing the Numbers

At a time when we should be spending more time on IT development and information management, the majority of us are spending less. We are caught in the maintenance trap of legacy systems, systems that require high levels of technical skill. If this is our business, you are in a slow death situation. A major re-think and radical re-engineering may

be in order. Spend now to save later. Companies that have followed this course have found that the initial costs are not all that high and the savings are greater than expected. Much to their surprise, by working smarter, the industry leaders have actually driven their costs below the average.

Closing Thoughts

Someone once defined insanity as "doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results". If we are going to change, (and most of us have no real choice), we have to do things differently. The secret to success is to do the right things differently and to do them in a way that makes the most sense. Change for change sake is no more appropriate than technology for technology sake.

You don't have to change everything at once, either. Or should you? The change in business process can be more evolutionary than revolutionary. What has to change more drastically, however, are the underlying fundamentals. The change in the foundation and architecture must be revolutionary if any change in the business process is to be realized. This will require looking at the whole process before working on any of the parts. Success will be measured in the creativity of the planning, so be sure to get the help you need before taking the first step.

The Microsoft Value Proposition

Is Microsoft up to the challenge? Do they have the technology and partners necessary to bring roles to the glass one function at a time? The simple answer is yes. Historically, Microsoft was focused on building out the infrastructure to support technology, not only on the desktop but in the data center. Now Microsoft is focusing on the business applications and enabling business processes. Through acquisition and development, Microsoft has developed a marketing leading Super-Platform that others vendors can only dream of.

To gain a better understanding the value of the Microsoft platform, read the PSC whitepapers called *Unified Messaging: Empowering Business Process* and *MS Dynamics: Empowering Business to Work Together*. You can find these whitepapers at: <http://www.psclistens.com/enTouchCMS/app/viewCategory?catId=13>

The PSC Value Proposition

PSC Group specializes in architectural approaches to maximizing the profitability of our clients by improving the delivery of services and enhancing the overall customer experience. We are business professionals who understand technology and technologists who understand business processes. Our solutions offer a tremendous value proposition for companies that view IT as a strategic resource.

We help our clients by drawing on our cross-industry experience, leveraging our information and assets management expertise, and providing solutions that have a significant return on investment. We can do this better than anyone because we listen better than anyone. Our only agenda is to improve our clients business, one project at a time.

It's all in the way we listen.®