The Myth of the Universal Standard

The first thing the average person realizes after they have purchased a TV, a Blu-ray disc™ player and also have a cable or satellite box for their home, is that each come with their own remote control. Of course, each is highly tuned to work directly with the associated piece of electronics, enabling you to finally fill up the basket of miscellaneous controllers on your coffee table. When you get tired of switching from remote to remote to control each separate device, it dawns on you - the electronics industry has provided a solution - the "Universal Remote"! This "standard" concept allows a single remote control to pull all of these electronic devices in, theoretically, an integrated fashion.

But, have you ever tried to use one of these universal remotes out of the box? Ah, there's the rub… A few things work, some don't, and some even provide additional functions just to confuse matters. Not to worry, the industry has a solution for that too! Each universal remote can be tuned to work in your specific home environment – you just need to "program" it. A true test in dexterity and patience - hold down a few selected buttons at just the right time (after thoroughly reading the documentation, tracking down access codes, etc., and finally asking your teenager for help) and, lo and behold, you are up and running with a single remote. Goodbye basket of remotes - viewing bliss is mine! But wait, after pushing a few buttons on your magical universal remote and not finding what you want (hopefully not reprogramming it to never work again in the process), you finally give up and go track down the specific remote you need and scan it so you can find the desired button on this device (the size of which is often as long as your forearm).

Business Process standard Interchange XML formats often create a similarly enchanting experience for a business user. The good news is that there is a solution! But it requires your vendors to work closely together to create a solution that solves your specific needs. Often, businesses purchase a variety of products to aid in their specific business problems across the enterprise. Of course, there evolves a desire to allow these systems to exchange Business Process information so the work done in all these different locations can be leveraged. One solution often tried is to attempt to standardize on a single solution across the enterprise. Sometimes this works, but often, one solution doesn't solve all the problems that these other specific tools provide solutions for. This can cause a high degree of frustration in the user community, reducing adoption rate of the blanket solution. The efforts put forth to optimize the business in this type of climate often end up outweighing the benefits.

Similar to the above Electronics industry example, the Business Process industry has been working on XML Standard Interchange formats like BPMN 2.0 XML and XPDL for many years. These standards have promise – the ability to share Business Process information across these tools in a way that allows the enterprise to involve the best business people in the effort to optimize their business. But, just like the Universal Remote, out of the box isn't a panacea. Many vendors only provide a limited set of the functionality provided by other tools, so even if the data can be delivered by the producer, it may be ignored by the consumer. Often, there is a desire to extend the information that can be exchanged, but that requires some customization to capture such data. And all too often, vendors don't interpret the standard consistently – resulting in imported data that doesn't look the same. So how does a business deal with this issue? First and foremost, you want to search for tools that are the best at supporting the standard to get the highest fidelity of information produced and consumed. But that still doesn't get you all the way there. You need to work with your vendors to create a solution that enables the data of most importance to you to be transferred.

Often, custom extensions have been created to capture important modeling data on the producer's side, which is critical to the consumer (and not included in the standard out of the box). Also, you may need to adopt specific modeling methodologies that map best to the data being transferred. The key to ensuring success is to spend some time with the vendors – get them on the same page - so you can reach the best possible level of integration. This gives you the opportunity to take advantage of the widest collection of Business Process Experts in your company, allowing you to achieve your business optimization goals. And best of all, since they all have their own best tool for their specific needs, they don't all have to fight over one "remote".

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