

# *Business Process Management (BPM) in the Mobile Era*

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# Feature Article: Surviving the Process Revolution: From Paper to PCs and Beyond



*By Steve Weissman*

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Much well-deserved noise has been made in recent years about the growing adoption of information technologies that are aimed at moving content off of paper and onto the computer screen. Scanning, OCR, and eforms are but three prominent and highly successful examples of this, and they have been ably aided and abetted by the likes of workflow and BPM, records management, and mobile devices.

But for all the good that these technologies have done, and for all the inroads they have made, one indisputable fact remains: the business processes they facilitate are still as they always have been. In truth, it's only the tools that have changed as the years have gone by.

Having said that, though, it is also true that today's processes have been transformed by these new and improved tools – a seeming contradiction that is the focus of this special analysis.

## **Take My Process – Please!**

Let's start by taking the insurance policy approval process as an example. Despite all the advanced technology that has been thrown at it, the workflow still calls for a customer to fill out an application, an underwriter to evaluate and approve it and an agent to prepare the policy document. Similarly, sales order entry still requires a sales rep to meet with a customer, capture the details of the order, and submit it for invoicing and fulfillment.

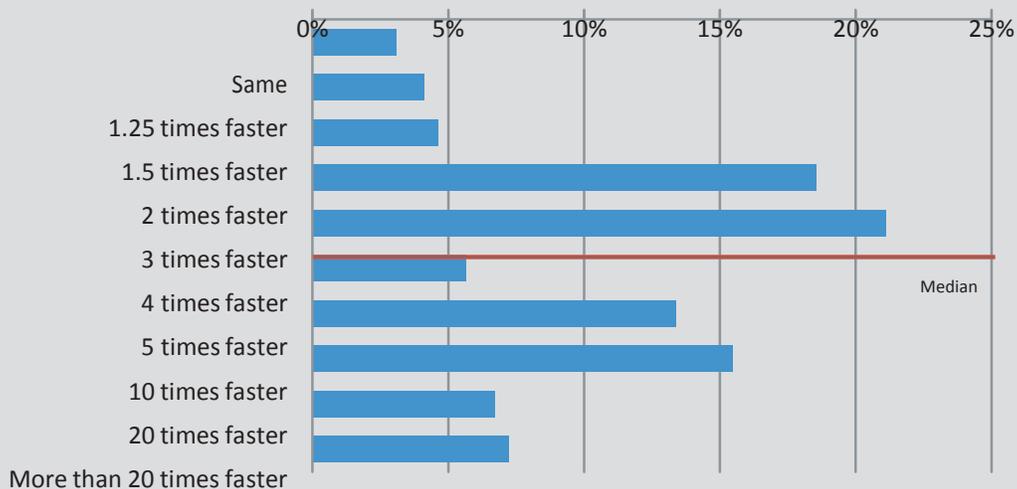
These tasks all originated with people reading, writing on, and physically delivering pieces of paper to move them along. Over time, though, the introduction of imaging, text extraction, document assembly, and electronic submission and delivery systems have enabled enormous advances in the speed, efficiency, and economy associated with getting this work done. Given

the growing ubiquity and power of today’s PCs, smartphones, and tablets, this revolution can only be expected to continue – and as it does, it is going to require a fair amount of creative and innovative thinking in order to bridge some significant operational gaps that have already opened and only promise to grow wider.

## Gap #1: What Organizations Say vs. What They Do

A recent survey by AIIM International found that 70% of respondents consider the use of scanning and capture to improve the speed of response to customers, suppliers, citizens, or staff by three times or more, and nearly 30% spoke of a factor of ten or more. (See Figure 1.) As far as they’re concerned, not only does the technology work, but it works quite well.

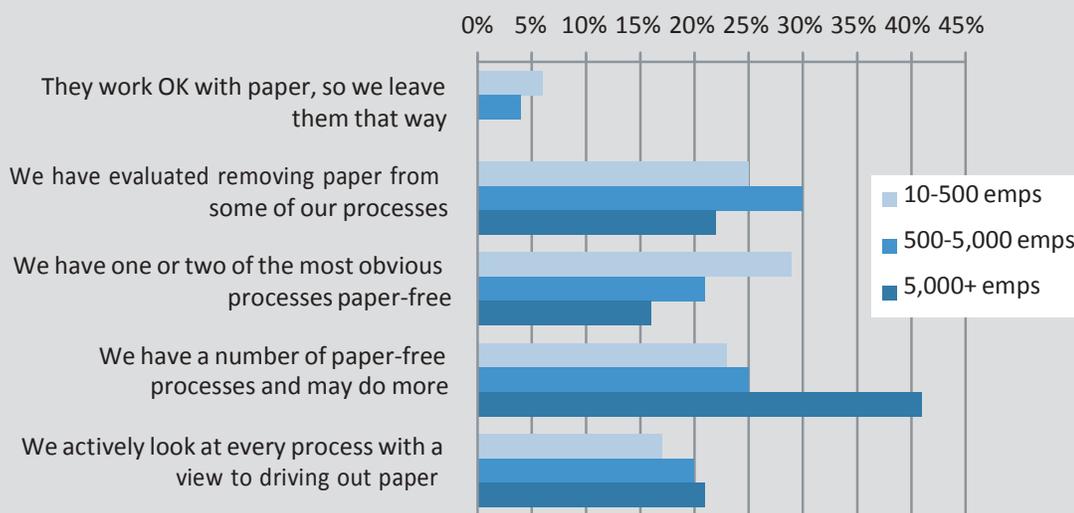
*Figure 1: By what factor would you say your use of scanning and capture improves the speed of response of your operational unit to customers, suppliers, citizens or staff? (Think about waiting time or elapsed time in minutes, hours or days) (N=194 users)*



Source: AIIM International

Despite this grand general endorsement, though, a third of small and mid-sized companies and 22% of the largest say they have yet to adopt any paper-free processes, and more than half report that just 10% or less of the processes that could be paper-free have so far been addressed (Figure 2). This being the case, it is entirely fair to ask: if the technology works so well, why, then, hasn’t it been deployed more extensively?

**Figure 2: How would you describe your progress towards eliminating paper from your business processes? (N=420)**



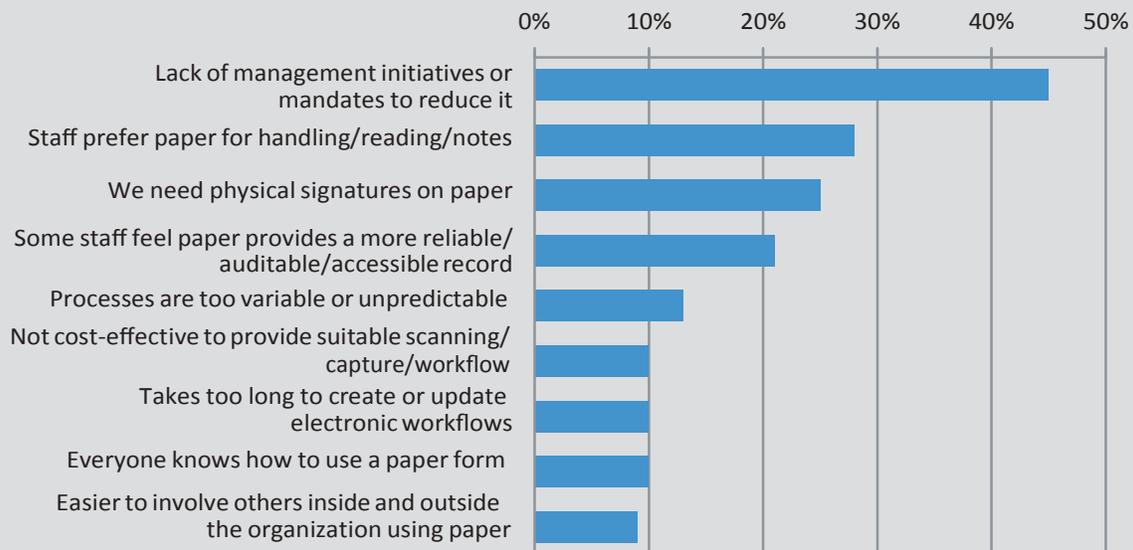
Source: AIIM International

A similar disconnect exists in the realm of mobility. Though fully two-thirds of respondents consider mobile technologies to be important or extremely important to improving their business processes, more than three-quarters say they have made no progress towards mobile-enabling their business processes. Perhaps most notably, essentially one-fourth say they haven't even thought about it! And yet 33% of respondents (compared to just 2% now) believe that in five years' time, more than half of their employees will be using iPads, tablets, or digital clipboards to fill in forms.

Again, it is fair to ask: if mobility is so big and important, why is it still receiving so relatively small an amount of practical attention?

The answer to both of the questions posed actually may be embedded in the survey results (see Figure 3), which suggest that respondents lay much of the responsibility at the feet of management, whose lack of initiatives or mandates is specifically cited as being the most likely reason for the prevalence of paper in particular in so many business processes. Staff is also to blame, preferring to handle and file paper – feeling it's more reliable – and being driven by the perceived need to physically apply signatures even though electronic ones will do.

Figure 3: Why do you think there is still paper in so many business processes? (Max two, N=420)



Source: AIIM International

## Gap #2: Man (and Woman) vs. the Machine

This letter conclusion warrants careful consideration, for it speaks of initiatives, mandates, and preferences, and makes no mention at all of technology. This is significant because these all stem from the people involved and not the systems in place – and the reason this is so is that the processes to which those systems are being applied were created and are executed by human beings, not machines.

Unfortunately, many process initiatives are catalyzed and shaped by the first or first few electronic solutions a change-minded organization looks at – even when its business particular needs are best addressed by something else. There’s no question that there is a lot of good technology out there, and newer, shinier versions are being released every day. But it’s impossible to truly evaluate how effective they may be for you unless you first understand the business problems you are trying to solve – and most of the time, those problems have more to do with the way people work than any software malfunctions.

## The Refrigerator Model of Process Success

The concept acquiring tools based on criteria that reflect human needs is far from revolutionary, and is commonly at work when we buy such a mundane items as refrigerators or lawn mowers! Even if we do so subconsciously, we nearly always figure out what we need before we plunk down our hard-earned money. For example, we have children, so we’d like the freezer compartment to be on the bottom so the kids can get their own ice cream bars. Or we are older, so we’d prefer a mower that is self-propelled so we can cut our grass without risking a coronary.

The real question, then, is why the acquisition of process technology doesn't follow this same blueprint more often than it does. One theory that has been advanced is that much of the technology in question has become so (relatively) inexpensive and so (relatively) easy to use that the attitude towards it has become much more casual. "After all," the thinking seems to be, "it's so straightforward that we may as well try it." Is it any wonder, then, that the issues associated with solution adoption have more to do with human resources than technical ones? Generally speaking, the technology usually works just fine, but it's too often mismatched with what the people actually need. And therein lies the rub.

## Surviving the Revolution

This analysis began with the apparent contradiction between the essentially unchanged nature of most business processes and the way these processes have been transformed by technology. The reason these two perspectives are not in conflict has to do with the fact that they both reflect human tendencies. Your ability to survive and thrive in the teeth of what has been described as "the process revolution" is tied to this fundamental truth, and thus requires that you do a credible job of understanding the need before engaging in the transaction of the purchase.

Getting inside the hearts, minds, and tasks of the people who make your processes go means you can evaluate the pros and cons of *any* information technology – new or old – in the only context that matters: the value it brings to your particular circumstance.

Why did scanners become so popular? Not because they are scanners, but because they enable the digitization that makes it possible for documents to be handled by multiple people or departments at one time, even when those people or departments exist in different locations. Why does OCR continue to be a big deal? Not because it is OCR, but because it speeds the entry of paper-based data into electronic information systems and facilitates the identification and correction of errors before they are entered.

Why are electronic forms becoming part-and-parcel of so many IT initiatives, especially those with Web front-ends? Not because they are electronic forms, but because they are intuitive interfaces end users can use to directly input their information into your back-end solutions.

Notice that in each of these cases, the fundamental attraction is process-oriented. Yes, the enabler is technological, but the benefit is business-based ... and the only way to ensure those benefits are received is to back into them by first engaging with your people to learn how things currently work and where improvements can be made.

## Mobility on the Move

This advice is especially salient in the current environment, in which mobility is rightly expected to be as disruptive to information architectures as the Web was 15-plus years ago. Remember those heady days of the mid to late 1990s, when trade show booth after trade show booth showcased screens of Web-enabled applications that may or may not have even benefited from Web enablement? You know what happened next: the bubble burst, and after a period of recovery, new, solid models for information access and engagement emerged.

We stand at the cusp of the same dynamic today, a time when there are more wireless devices being used in the United States than there are people (source: Washington Post [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-tech/post/number-of-cell-phones-exceeds-us-population-ctia-trade-group/2011/10/11/gIQARNcEcL\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-tech/post/number-of-cell-phones-exceeds-us-population-ctia-trade-group/2011/10/11/gIQARNcEcL_blog.html)), and more smartphones and pads are being bought than netbooks, laptops, and PCs (see Figure 4). This has expanded the very nature of capture to include imaging and even OCR from camera-equipped, high-horsepower mobile devices. It has driven the rise of social media, first in consumer contexts and now increasingly in businesses as a means of communication and process status reporting. And it has led to the emergence of location services as an important new capability for organizations to leverage as they make the most effective use they can of their people and resources around the globe.

Figure 4:

Worldwide smart phone and client PC shipments				
Shipments and growth rates by category, Q4 2011 and full year 2011				
Category	Q4 2011 shipments (millions)	Growth Q4'11/Q4'10	Full year 2011 shipments (millions)	Growth 2011/2010
Smart phones	158.5	56.6%	487.7	62.7%
Total client PCs	120.2	16.3%	414.6	14.8%
- Pads	26.5	186.2%	63.2	274.2%
- Netbooks	6.7	-32.4%	29.4	-25.3%
- Notebooks	57.9	7.3%	209.6	7.5%
- Desktops	29.1	-3.6%	112.4	2.3%

Source: Canalys estimates © Canalys 2012

## Brass Tacks

So what does all this mean for organizations wanting to continue and/or accelerate their move from paper to PCs and beyond? Here's a recap of the salient points we've discussed:

Business processes actually haven't changed all that much over the years, decades, and centuries many of them have been in existence.

The tools used to improve and facilitate those processes, however, are dramatically different than they once were and are ever-pushing the envelope of innovation.

As they do, they're having an ever greater effect on the people who execute those processes in terms of their comfort with their environment the efficiency and effectiveness with which they work.

Smart organizations, therefore, will root their future planning not only in process requirements but in human factors as well, paying particular attention to where the two intersect.

Getting down to brass tacks, this requires a certain measure of "rethink" in order to best accommodate the latest and greatest technologies. Among the issues to (re)consider are:

Governance, not only of information and records in the way to which we've long been accustomed, but of the myriad new devices now being used capture, submit, interact with, and deliver that information and those records. For example, the very mobility that makes smartphones and tablets so attractive also makes them much harder to protect and control than conventional computing platforms.

Mobile-enablement of back-end information systems, especially existing systems of record, for which decisions have to be made regarding the construction of native mobile apps or the development of Web-based front-ends that are usable with mobile browsers.

The ability to handle multichannel inputs, i.e., not just paper, scans, and faxes, but emails, photos, texts, tweets, etc.

The ability to support multichannel routing and delivery, i.e., not just via email, but also by text, social media, and, yes, voice!)

User education and training, imparting expectations and procedures for complying with organizational policies governing the use of enterprise information and records, the bringing of users' own personal technology into the workplace and/or using it for work purposes, and participating in the new media (social or otherwise)

The fun part of all this is that it is additive to the usual exercises aimed at understanding your critical factors for business success and quantifying the performance thresholds you need your information systems to enable. No one said this would be easy, but taking the time to map it out and do it right will help you do more than merely survive the brewing process revolution.