

Telling Business Stories with Pictures

[00:00:00] One must understand and describe a business process before it can be improved. The Business Process Model and Notation standard, or BPMN, describes a visual language for telling coherent stories about even the most complex business processes.

[00:00:16] BPMN helps make our implicit understanding of processes explicit. Consequently, processes become testable and manageable.

[00:00:27] BPMN is easy for people to understand. Nevertheless, it is sufficiently rigorous to facilitate integration with information technology and process automation, where appropriate.

[00:00:39] Like any language, BPMN has a vocabulary. Those vocabulary elements are visualized using symbols. There's a syntax. That is, there are rules regarding how the vocabulary can be combined. Finally, each vocabulary element has a precise meaning.

[00:00:58] It's been estimated that there are about 170,000 words actively used in the English language. However, just 3,000 words account for 95% of the most common documents encountered in daily life. The same general relationship holds for the BPMN language. That is, a small number of symbols will allow you to understand most business process stories described with BPMN. These basic vocabulary elements are activities, events, gateways, and sequence flows.

[00:01:30] Activities represent actions to be taken and tasks to be completed. Events indicate the conditions that trigger and complete an instance of a process. Gateways manage the splitting and merging of a process flow. The sequence flow indicates how a process progresses from start to end.

[00:01:53] Consider an example. Let's say that once a prospective exchange member has been identified, the recruiter conducts research into the prospect's background and current responsibilities. Next, the recruiter creates a profile record in the CRM database. If the prospect is a good match with the target profile, the recruiter will send an invitation to the prospect, update the database, and complete the process. On the other hand, if the prospect doesn't fit the target profile, the recruiter will make an appropriate note in the database, and the process will be completed.

[00:02:32] Here's how that story might be told using BPMN. The instance of the process starts when the prospect has been identified. The prospect's background is researched. A database record is created. If there's a fit, an invitation is sent, the database is updated, and the process is completed. However, if there's no fit, the sequence flow takes an alternative path that bypasses the "Send invitation" task before the database is updated and the process is completed.

[00:03:10] Stories told with texts can be presented in varying degrees of detail, can be augmented with other media, and can utilize an expanded vocabulary. So, too, can BPMN models. However, to get started, all you need are these.