

From Choreography to Jamming

Human Interaction Management (HIM) supports knowledge work processes

Janne J. Korhonen

Translated from "Koreografiasta jammailuun" (in Finnish), originally published in Tietoviikko, May 11, 2007

HIM not only refers to the successful Finnish rock band. In business process management, the acronym refers to the concept called Human Interaction Management, created by Keith Harrison-Broninski.

HIM is a holistic theory of human collaboration that draws from psychology, biology, social systems theory and learning theory. On the other, it is a novel approach to business process management.

Whereas traditional Workflow Management (WfM) and Business Process Management (BPM) deal with "mechanistic" business processes, in which human interaction is limited to certain data entry and decision-making points, HIM expands process management to irregular collaborations.

Such processes include product development, marketing processes, project management and product lifecycle management.

In a traditional workflow, the process flow is scripted: each conceivable flow path needs to be explicitly specified. Based on centralized control, workflow management is best applicable to automating straightforward sequences of activity, but it falls short in managing more complex collaborations.

An imperative description of such process logic is also often called orchestration.

BPM extends process management from orchestration to choreography, which describes the coordination between processes. Choreography specifies the boundaries of collaborative processes: what interactions, in general, are feasible between the processes. Each contingent flow path needs not be specified in advance.

The approach is applicable to structured collaborations (e.g. order management), in which the inter-process coordination is relatively stable.

Neither approach, however, is suitable for managing dynamic collaborations, in which the process evolves as it unfolds. Human Interaction Management extends process management also to this kind of processes. In HIM, the coordination between process roles can be negotiated in the course of the process.

I have previously written how "Integration Became Orchestration" (Tietoviikko, August 14, 2003) and how it has been moved "From Orchestration to Choreography" (Tietoviikko, November 11, 2005).

To extend this music metaphor, the next big change in process management could be characterized as a change-over from choreography to jamming: the process participants improvise as the process happens to proceed. Is it a coincidence that Harrison-Broninski has also earned credit as a jazz pianist?

Traditional collaboration tools (knowledge management, content management, groupware) have made communication faster, but they have not been able to make human collaboration more effective.

Everyone is able to produce information faster than before and readily distribute it to others. However, the information-overloaded employees have to run faster and faster to even stand

still. HIM brings the collaboration tools to a unified process context and promises to make work genuinely more effective.

In order to better manage human interactions, communication must be structured and goal-driven. The process participants need to see who else is involved in the process and what their capabilities, roles and responsibilities are.

Human beings do not sequence their work like a computer. Work is more or less structured but it cannot be described as a flowchart.

Knowledge work is largely about research, comparison, idea generation, consideration and decision-making that calls for collaboration, innovation and adaptability. Traditional BPM tools view process as a program and are not suited to mental work processes. HIM also supports work of the latter kind.

Much of the routine work can already be automated with workflow and BPM tools. The knowledge work by humans will be further emphasized in the future. It will soon be the only competitive differentiator of companies.

Indeed, making collaboration more effective will be the next step in developing the overall organizational effectiveness.

HIMS and HumanEdj

To support collaborative work, what is needed is a process-driven solution, with which all activities can be managed—not just transactional but also collaborative processes.

The approach should embrace both a theory and a software tool with which the theory can be put into practice.

Human Interaction Management System (HIMS) is a process modeling and execution tool based on the HIM theory and HumanEdj, published in January, is its first reference implementation.

The basic version of the software is free and can be downloaded and used by anyone. For the time being, the java-based client is available for all Windows operating systems, in the future also for other operating systems and several devices.

HumanEdj is based on a distributed peer-to-peer architecture; no server installation is required. Each process participant has its personal desktop application with which to participate in the collaboration.

HumanEdj structures functions, communication and information retrieval as well as maintains information on who does what, when, where and why. The user can manage her own data and private processes and share data to others and participate in the public process.

The application is first of a kind and rather unintuitive to use at first. To improve work practices with the help of HumanEdj, one first needs to get acquainted to HIM models and principles.

A radical overhaul of the current HumanEdj user interface is currently in progress. The new look-and-feel will be seamlessly integrated into the desktop, making HumanEdj adoption simpler. At the end of the day, the purpose of the tool is to facilitate work and not to add there anything extraneous.