

## ***It's All About Basics***

*We learn many simple skills of life in kindergarten. For some of us it is the first time we sit still for long periods of time. It may be the first time we are asked to be quiet and really listen to others. We take for granted the hot lunches that some children experience for the first time at kindergarten. It may be the first time a child has a teacher and a mentor.*

*Their parents send them into their classrooms with simple hopes and simple dreams. Many parents are filled with aspirations and expectations of their children. Their prayer is that their children will find encouragement here. They hope their hearts and minds will both be nourished.*

*For some of us it is the first time we pick up scissors or write on a chalkboard. With simple tools, like pencils and crayons, children enter a brave new world. Kindergarten is about simple work and simple play. It's all about basics.*

*Our life becomes more complex as we progress through grade school, high school, college, and into our professional careers. The business world tends to create all manner of new demands. For many of us, it means raising children and watching them cycle through grade school to college and the difficult choices they face, which mirror the difficult choices we faced at their age.*

*Looking back, we ask ourselves: "When did life become so complicated?"*

B2B should really stand for "back to basics." The barrage of documents touting technology advances, multi-tier architectures, or open standards that I receive in my office is impressive. A virtual avalanche of information that is intended to sell me on the benefits of one vendor's solution over the next guy's solution. If only B2B were that simple. If all we had to do was buy the software and it magically just happened. But B2B is not about the technology being simple.

What are most frequently missing are the human aspects to go along with the technology. The marketing brochures don't focus on change management, if they touch on them at all. They slide right through the emotional wrangling people may go through. They slip past what makes B2B both hard and complex to implement.

I love the Gartner Group <sup>TM</sup> "hype cycle." It endeavors to place, on a time line, a picture of a technologies life from "spark" through hype to realization. Why it works so well is that it has nothing to do with technology. It is about human nature.

The "hype cycle" begins with a trigger-- some event or technology trigger that generates a spark in everyone's imagination. It goes next through a peak of inflated expectations, where the hype reaches its zenith. Often expanded by technology soothsayers, marketing, and the media, the fever grows unabated until reality pushes a nail through its puffed up veneer. "This is going to be a lot harder (cost more, be slower in coming) than we thought."

The over-inflated bubble pops and we go through the trough of disillusionment. Our unrealistic high meets an equally unrealistic low. Our disappointment shows on our faces until we step back and reassess what can be done during the slope of enlightenment. Yes, there is some kernel we can take away. Yes, there is something on which to build. Yes, we can make something work out of this disappointment. Finally we arrive at the plateau of productivity.

The cycle is equally applicable to dating, marriage, raising kids, and your career. It's not as much about technology as it is about human nature. It is about "us."

It is about the part of us all that strives to find the "silver bullet." It is about the part of each of us that looks for the improbable: the new cancer treatment when hope has seemingly been lost and the home run with two outs in the bottom of the ninth to win the game. But we can endlessly search for the killer B2B application while missing wonderful opportunities.

And it is about our own laziness. The part of each of us that would like to find the new business breakthrough that will make us loads of money, fame, or the simple life. What we fail to grasp is that looking for the easy solution frequently makes things much harder for us. It leads us away from simple and away from basics.

Our attitude tends to be “if we build it, they will come,” but we forget there is substantial preparation required ahead of time. Looking for the easy route distracts us from the pile of hard work setting just ahead of us. It is hard work making it look easy.

Some of my business associates have been sorely disappointed that their applications haven’t achieved the business benefits that were detailed in their business cases. They spend their time revising their utilization or adoption projections or explaining to their bosses (or themselves) why it is going to take longer than they thought. They draw up revised implementation plans, which again will disappoint and create a new cycle of explanations to the boss (and themselves). Or they spend their time printing up brochures or preparing email blasts that sing of benefits, while missing the human nature aspects that really pave the way.

There should be spring training for B2B, where we work on fundamentals.

**The good news is that there are only three things you have to do.** The three things are better, faster, cheaper.

If you can do those three things simultaneously and if you can articulate these benefits and if your trading partner is sufficiently convinced to move with you, your plan is home free.

If you can do only two of those three, you may still be successful. But it will be far more difficult. You still have to articulate these benefits and convince your trading partner.

If you can do only one of those three, the road is even more difficult. It will be nearly impossible. You still have to articulate these benefits and convince your trading partner, but you can be easily sidetracked with questions of “offsets.” “Sure, you can make it better, but will it cost more?”

**The bad news is that there are three things you have to do.** The three are better, faster, cheaper. You have to do all three simultaneously and substantially to guarantee you can get your plan accepted (and you still haven’t even built anything yet).

**Now the hard part: It's not about YOU!** Remember our old friends better, faster, cheaper? That is better, faster, and cheaper for your trading partner, not for you. Once you have their side of the equation figured out, you need to translate that into the

business benefits you will see on your side to determine whether you have a viable project.

It is easier to get your suppliers to do things than your customers. But, contrary to popular belief, it is still difficult to get your suppliers to do what you want. There are thousands of ways they can sidestep and delay.

First, you need to get into your trading partner's "heart and mind." It requires that you be so close to your customer that you can "project" yourself into their skin. You know them so well that you understand how they will react. You can move beneath what they say to what they feel. You will know what is behind what they say. You will know when what they say contradicts what they really want to say, and you will know why. You know when they are just "jockeying for position."

Then you can take it to your management to sell your project.

**It's the business process...** We overcomplicate on one hand and look for the easy way (no matter how complicated) on the other. We are far better off looking for simple approaches. Simple is not the same as easy. Simple starts with a realistic assessment of your current status and a hard look at the many opportunities that are before you.

Starting with the business process forces us "back to basics." It requires us to ask hard questions, "Why are we doing it this way?," "What is this intended to accomplish?," and "What are the fundamental steps the user will have to take?"

When we force ourselves to take a hard look at the business process, we put ourselves in our customer's shoes. In our minds, we stare at the computer screen in front of us as if we were the user and say, "Is this the best use my time?" and we are forced to ask ourselves, "Am I proud of what this design says about me?"

Looking at those opportunities through the filter of your trading partner's eyes brings you a realistic perspective of the landscape. The most fabulous solution that your trading partner will not or cannot implement is fruitless. Better to move on. Look to streamline the business process; eliminate valueless steps or processes. Look at the value of data throughout the information chain.

All this begins with surveying and documenting the business process from end to end. Everything drives from the business process. We need to continually remind

ourselves, “It’s the business process....” Each time we fall in love with the technology we have to remind ourselves, “It’s the business process....” Each time it “clicks” that what we are suggesting may be too complicated, it is. Get back to basics by getting back to the business process.

We always seem to miss the fact that the business process is central to everything we do with B2B. The business process is how we measure and determine our probability of success. The business process is the only way we can communicate a vision to others. It is how we “sell” our programs to our management and our trading communities. We get excited about technologies and architectures, about new devices and hardware, while missing the most obvious factor for success-- “What can I really do with this?”

It is like deciding you are going to take a vacation and going out and buying a car. Then deciding that you are going to vacation in Tahiti! The purchase of car and the vacation no longer have anything to do with one another. The car isn’t going to get you there. The car is not beneficial to the vacation. This is the same as when we design the B2B architecture and tools prior to defining our business process. Why do we tend to do that? It doesn’t make sense when we look at it from a distance, but it usually is because the architecture has such a long purchase and development cycle. We need to start with a well-defined and crisply documented business requirement and business process flow.

How do we describe our business process? How do we explain and communicate all this? How do we document what needs to be built and what resources need to be “put together?”

I like to develop use cases to help understand how it will work. Use cases can be done in a variety of ways. You can buy software to create very elaborate documentation. While diagrams and charts and “swim lanes” have their place, for my money the most effective is a text based use case, supplemented by a few diagrams or high-level flow charts. For most applications, you can probably use tools you already have.

Use cases get down on paper what it is you are trying to build and accomplish. It details the business flow and captures issues and concerns. These are “living,

breathing” documents that carry you from conception through development, testing, training, and implementation. These can run dozens or hundreds of pages. If they get to be too large, they should be broken into multiple smaller use cases that detail one small stream of the business process.

You may end up with many of these and one small, overarching use case that describes how all the “streams” come together. An analogy to an aerial photograph of a river delta gives us the best picture of this. Each river tributary has a use case, with a high-level use case that spans the entire delta.

A use case helps us keep focused on the business process.

**Keeping it simple is hard work.** Keeping things simple is probably the hardest work I do each day. It is easy to overly complicate things. It is easy to get lost on the road to success. It is easy to add one more bell or one more whistle. You may find your application overloaded. You may find your plan bloated and in need of a diet. You can find what you have designed no longer meets the objectives. You can find you have to “back track” and eliminate some things from your design. This can be very difficult, especially if you have been “touting” some feature or function that has generated excitement. Going back and taking that off the drawing board can be painful and confusing to others.

There are other times you need to fight the impulse to take the easy approach because it is not the simple approach. Another global designer, Dorothy Erbacher, was working with me on what verbage to use to describe the status of a shipment in an order status application. The “native” API out of our backend application called a status “delivered” once data had been passed to our logistics application. Essentially, it was just notifying another application that the order could be filled and shipped. Internally we knew (and talked) in the language of the API. But “delivered” has a different meaning to the customer. It means the box is literally in their “hot little hands.” We needed to search out the characteristics that best described the status of the shipment to the customer in the language that was most meaningful to them, and we needed to confirm that language with our customers. The easy way would be to use the applications description of the status. The simple way was to describe in language that best communicated reality to the customer. But the simple way was only simple in the end

result; there was more work and more system logic necessary to make it simple for the user.

We have to continually “peel the onion,” taking layer and layer of complexity away from our designs.

As a wise person pointed out, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” It applies to kindergarten and it applies to B2B. The main thing is staying with the basics. The business process is the “heart and soul” of B2B.

Keep it central. Keep it basic. Keep it simple.

*“Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.”* - Thomas Alva Edison



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