

A Government Institution's BPM Tale: An Interview with Bert Schelfaut of VDAB

Some of society's biggest service providers are government institutions. However, their effectiveness is often hampered by their bureaucratic and cumbersome operations. We visited VDAB, the Flemish public employment service, which has launched initiatives to embrace new technological developments and become more efficient. Bert Schelfaut, Manager of VDAB's Corporate Process Innovation Team, is on the frontline when it comes to guiding the organisation into the future. We asked him for his insights on the role played by BPM.

VDAB was having difficulties translating management's vision to the work floor. So, 3 years ago, BPM was introduced primarily to serve as a link between the two. But VDAB also wanted to implement BPM to make its internal working procedures more transparent—to show where funds are being invested and where VDAB needs to optimise its processes. The organisation created the Process Innovation Team (PIT) to guide the BPM implementation. BPM has been introduced in internal departments, and a pilot exercise is running in the regional offices.

Bert Schelfaut: "Implementing BPM will create a more flexible organisation. The goal is to have an overview of our core processes, to work with them in a uniform manner, and to use BPM as an instrument for managing the organisation."

Gaining Internal Credibility

BPM will not simply 'freeze' existing processes as they are. "On the contrary, gathering 'As-is' information on processes facilitates detecting problematic situations so that you can re-design certain processes and renew the business. But we must be careful not to lose ourselves in detailed descriptions—understanding large building blocks, and how they are related, is essential."

Familiarising the organisation with BPM as a management technique is just one of the team's duties. Obtaining an overview on enterprise architecture and managing and prioritising the project portfolio are additional responsibilities high on

the agenda. But carrying out these tasks successfully depends greatly on the cooperation of all parties involved and on their joint collaboration. The PIT is expected to guide and stimulate people and to provide the framework for institutionalising BPM practices. So how do they cope with the high expectations when their role is essentially to sensitise instead of command? “Steadily gaining internal credibility and ensuring strong leadership is vital. To build this solid reputation, we’re constantly repeating our vision and the underlying rationale. Gradually, but surely, we’re making progress.”

Providing Basic Processes

An additional challenge that Bert sees coming up entails a strategic repositioning exercise. VDAB is redefining its traditional position as ‘a mechanism aligning supply and demand in the labour market’ towards becoming ‘a holistic career supporting institution’. Whereas VDAB used to focus on serving job-seeking individuals, it is now striving to involve all citizens actively throughout their entire working life.

Obviously, such a change—which challenges the roles of all stakeholders—impacts existing processes profoundly. The PIT is working hard to define (or re-define) core processes to fit the new organisation. This repositioning also impacts the existing IT portfolio, as new technological developments are being introduced regularly. One example is an online platform where people can post all kinds of information, from diplomas to personal development plans. This platform should facilitate interaction between employers and job-seekers, while also encouraging more personal career management.

Moreover, external developments are challenging the organisation as well. The public is increasingly employing alternate means to obtain desired services instead of following the standard processes provided by VDAB. “I admit it’s becoming difficult to control and steer. Consider, for instance, the apps phenomenon. People are using externally developed apps that interfere with VDAB’s processes. But as these digital trends are here to stay, it will become VDAB’s role to monitor developments as we evolve into the future. Our role will be to provide the basic guiding processes. In a stable and balanced process system, internal processes can freely interact with external processes.”

Enabling the Transformation

So, what is the outlook for the PIT? VDAB will always need a governing body to oversee its IT projects. “But we must not become a department, because VDAB certainly doesn’t need a new silo. Instead, a small flexible team should take up this role. As for BPM, my team’s job is to guide the implementation of BPM as a

management technique until it is institutionalised. Ideally, BPM should be steered by the management committee, and then our guidance will become redundant.”

In the meantime, the team will continue spreading the BPM message throughout the organisation via proactive communication. Bert Schelfaut acknowledges that, despite its ambition, VDAB is still a long way from being recognised as a holistic career supporting institution. But a tool like BPM can be an invaluable aid in getting there: “Having that helicopter view on the organisation and managing by processes will enable the transformation.”

Bert Schelfaut is Manager of Corporate Process Innovation at VDAB. This team was set up in 2009 to facilitate the organisation’s path to greater agility, with business-IT alignment as its baseline. Prior to this position, Bert developed and managed the VDAB multi-channel contact centre for 12 years and coordinated a large European software project (2 years).

VDAB is the Flemish Agency for public employment. They are mandated to match supply and demand between open positions offered by employers and job seeking individuals in the Flemish Region in Belgium.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-03936-7>

Transforming Through Processes

Leading Voices on BPM, People and Technology

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2014, XI, 55 p., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-03936-7