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**The Status of Research on Leadership in Business Process Management: A
Call for Action**

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The Status of Research on Leadership in Business Process Management: A Call for Action

ABSTRACT: *Business Process Management is recognised as a holistic management strategy aimed at achieving higher performance outcomes by optimising the business processes in organisations. BPM initiatives require high commitment, and leadership capabilities. Leadership has constantly been recognised as one of the critical success factors of BPM initiatives. However, the nature and characteristics of leadership in BPM is a relatively under-researched area. In this research-in-progress paper we present the outcomes of a systematic literature review on leadership in BPM. While our review confirms a strong consensus on the importance of leadership in BPM, it also depicts the dearth of research in this area. We present a detailed analysis on the key themes observed within the current research with an analysis of the content and theories/ frameworks used, where gaps are identified and a call for action is made with a recommended research agenda.*

Keywords: Business Process Management, Strategic Initiatives, Transformational-Transactional Leadership.

BACKGROUND

Business Process Management (BPM¹) is a holistic management strategy that assists organisations to rethink their management practices and processes. The aim is to become highly competitive by dramatically improving customer services with reduced operational costs and efficiencies (Harmon, 2010). A number of readiness and maturity models (Abdolvand, Albadvi, & Ferdowsi, 2008; de Boer, Müller, & ten Caten, 2015; de Bruin & Rosemann, 2005) have been proposed and numerous studies on critical success factors (CSF) for BPM have been conducted over the years to understand the adoption and success of BPM, which have been a core interest within the BPM research community (see, Al-Mashari & Zairi, 1999; Bandara, Alibabaei, & Aghdasi, 2009; Dabaghkashani, Hajiheydari, & Haghghinasab, 2012; Ravesteyn & Batenburg, 2010; Recker, 2014).

¹ Business Process Reengineering (BPR) gained popularity in 1990 after an article “Reengineering Work: Don’t Automate, Obliterate” published by Michael Hammer in Harvard Business Review. Business Process Management (BPM) incorporates the fundamentals of BPR and is a more current term representing both the radical and incremental approaches to process reform. The term ‘BPM’ will be used throughout this paper to refer all previous BPR and general business process improvement approaches.

Importance of leadership in BPM is one of the critical success factors identified by previous studies (Bandara, Sadiq, Indulska, & Chong, 2007; Sutcliffe, 1999).

Leadership vision and commitment towards BPM were identified as the most important critical success factors (Grover, Jeong, Kettinger, & Teng, 1995; Hammer & Stanton, 1995; Hoopes, 1995). Hammer (2007) mentioned the need for leadership as one of the five process enablers. Rosemann, de Bruin, and Power (2006) emphasised on the need for a process focused leadership as one of the capabilities required for the progression towards effective organisational wide BPM activity. Furthermore, Hall, Rosenthal, and Wade (1994) emphasised on the need for a fully committed senior management for BPM success.

Example literature discussed above confirm that leadership has a very high impact on BPM and supported the need for visionary and creative leadership for effective handling of the related political and social issues. However, the current literature on BPM though stressing significantly upon the need for effective leadership, provides limited understanding of the nature, definition and properties of leadership in Business Process Management initiatives. Hyötyläinen and vom Brocke (2015, p. 156) emphasised the 'significance of various leadership styles of the managers to increase both the fit with the environment and alignment with the strategies', indicative of the importance of having a deep understanding of leadership within BPM initiatives.

This paper proposes a call for further research to define this important phenomenon. It presents the results of a systematic literature review [in the form of a descriptive and narrative review (King & He, 2005)], with the aim to understand the current status of literature on leadership within a BPM context. This paper next presents the research approach, followed by the study outcomes. The article concludes with summary observations and discussions which forms the basis to a call for action with a proposed research agenda.

RESEARCH APPROACH

To understand the research related to leadership in the BPM context, we embarked into a systematic literature review following the approach presented by Bandara, Furtmuller, Gorbacheva, Miskon, and Beekhuyzen (2015). The multi-phases applied within this approach are described in more detail next.

Search Strategy

An evolutionary search strategy was used for this review to identify and extract the publications related to BPM initiatives and leadership. The terms and keywords were updated depending on the outcomes of each iteration. The search for literature covered the period between 1990 [when Hammer (1990) first published his article “Reengineering Work: Don’t Automate, Obliterate” in Harvard Business Review] to October 2015. Given the goal of this literature review was to understand leadership in the BPM context, we used ‘leadership’ and ‘business process management’ with alternative terms and synonyms to develop the search keywords. The term ‘characteristics’ was included in the 2nd iteration of literature search to improve the relevance of literature with the stipulated goals of this review.

Insert Table 1 about search keywords here

The topic selected for this systematic review is of a multidisciplinary nature. Therefore, the subject domains and related databases and journals were carefully selected (exhibited in Table 2) to search the literature.

Insert Table 2 about list of subject areas and search sources here

The searching utilised specific queries (see Table 3). Only peer-reviewed articles were selected for the review. In the first iteration, the literature was searched using title as the parameter, followed by “abstract” in the next iteration. Both title & abstract parameters were simultaneously used where the database provided the complex search option.

Insert Table 3 about search queries here

Our literature search resulted in the identification of 27 articles (see the list of papers with asterisks in the reference list) related to leadership in Business Process Management (and its alternative terms²). The corpus includes two (2) PhD theses, one (1) conference proceeding, one (1) book section, and twenty-three (23) journal articles.

² For example, Business process reengineering (BPR), Business process improvement (BPI), Business process change (BPC), Business process automation (BPA). See <http://www.appian.com/bpmbasics/bpm-glossary/> for further details.

Descriptive Overview of the Literature.

Figure 1 depicts in summary the distribution of papers across time. Though the topic has been discussed over the years, right from the 1990's as BPM emerged, with a stable and small growth observed, the number of papers addressing this important phenomena is still scarce.

Insert Figure 1 about chronological status of research in BPM leadership here

To understand the origin of the studies, we looked at the geographical distribution of the literature (see Figure 2). It is evident that almost 96% of these studies were conducted in the developed and western countries. Among the 96%, 44% studies were conducted in the USA, and 22% in the UK while only 1 study was conducted in Iran (a developing country).

The limited amount of research in the context of developing countries reflect an opportunity to understand the leadership phenomenon in the developing countries for BPM initiatives, where large scale process reform work has started to emerge (Bandara, Syed, Kapurubandra, & Rupasinghe, 2012; Heeks, 2003; Weerakkody, Janssen, & Dwivedi, 2011). Furthermore, as discussed by Bin Taher, Krotov, and Silva (2015), the models and experience of Western countries cannot be directly applied in Southeast Asia and Middle East due to various socio-economic and cultural differences.

Insert Figure 2 about geographical distribution of literature here

LITERATURE ANALYSIS

The literature reviewed on leadership in business process management (and its alternative terms) resulted in identification of two main themes. Under the first theme, the focus of the literature is towards identifying leadership as one of the critical success factors for BPM initiatives. The second theme (although very limited) includes literature that tried to define the properties, characteristics, and behaviour (styles) of leadership in BPM. A summary of what was observed under these two broad themes are presented below.

Literature Positioning Leadership as a Critical Success Factor for BPM Initiatives

Abdolvand et al. (2008) discussed the role of egalitarian leadership in BPM readiness and concurred leadership and top management support as critical success factors for BPM readiness. The study by Abdous (2011) defined sustained support from senior leadership as a necessary factor for

BPM success in higher education. Alavi and Yoo (1995) attributed the need for executive leadership and their commitment with resource allocation, budgets, and technology in-order to gain organisation wide support for reengineering efforts. Cha, Hwang, and Gregor (2015) used a resource-based view and defined leadership as a transformation capability that positively influenced the project's goals. Reengineering is a process of continuous improvement that requires active leadership roles for corporate changes, as stated by Champy and Weger (2005). Grant (2002) attributed the lack of sustained management commitment and leadership amongst few other factors contributing to BPM failure. Sarker and Lee (1999) confirmed the significant influence of top management leadership on BPM initiatives and stated that the top management should use transformative leadership to create a common mission among the employees. Box and Ken (2005) recognised that for change to be effective, it requires strong leadership behaviour to create a shared vision and clear objectives.

Alghamdi, Goodwin, and Rampersad (2014) emphasised the creation of leadership steering committees for public sector transformation projects. Antony (2015) concluded the lack of visionary leadership as the primary failure of change efforts to introduce Lean Six Sigma (which we see as a proxy to BPM) in the context of higher education. In a similar manner, another study emphasised that the ability of leadership to formulate and enforce a vision and development of required values between the stakeholders as key for change management success and technology adoption (Bin Taher et al., 2015).

Law and Ngai (2007) examined the relationship between IT infrastructure capabilities, business process improvement and IT governance and concluded that leadership attitude is closely linked with the adoption process and to be effective, a CIO should process business, technology, organisational, and functional leadership competencies. Becker and Glascoff (2014) discussed that effective leaders have the ability to understand the importance of process measurement for predictable and stable performance. Goeke and Antonucci (2013) compared the competencies between BPM leadership and BPM operational positions in service and manufacturing sectors and conclude the existence of differences between leadership competencies where the leadership position exhibits competencies related to consensus building, vision creation, and understanding of corporate strategy.

Chamberlin (2010a) categorised BPM as a high-risk strategy that requires powerful leadership. Consequently, lack of effective leadership at the senior level is a predicament for radical change in BPM (Chamberlin, 2010b). The study advocated that the reengineering leaders should exhibit passion and commitment and understand that dynamic leadership is key to handle complexities associated with reengineering. Henry (1994) posited that reengineering leadership requires a fanatic behaviour with commitment, scepticism and willingness to learn attitude. Palmberg (2010) studied the organisation roles and structures in process management implementation and suggested the need for improved management approaches for leadership and culture.

Literature Focused Towards Defining the Attributes and Properties of Leadership

The second theme identified in the literature was more or less focused towards defining the attributes and properties of leadership. The details of the salient points are as follows.

Abdolvand et al. (2008) discussed the role of egalitarian leadership in BPM readiness and concurred leadership and top management support as critical success factors for BPM readiness. The study further referred to the Situational Leadership Theory (see, Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001) as a suitable approach to define leadership behaviours in BPM to get expertise from other members who may not be the designated leader.

Chappell (2000) applied the Visionary Leadership Theory (Sashkin, 1987) to define the BPM leaders' behaviours, characteristics and organisation development skills. The study confirmed that the leader's transformational characteristics and commitment are closely associated with the success of BPM projects.

Daly (2002) studied the impact of ethical leadership and organisational climate on governmental process changes in a municipal organisation. The study concurs that for reengineering to be successful, the cohesiveness and continuity of leadership is important and the leaders must exercise the hands-on approach to organisational ethical standards.

Edward and Mbohwa (2013, p. 125) argued that the dynamic economic environments and globalisation requires an 'evolutionary' approach to leadership. The study emphasised a variety of issues caused by external environmental and technological influences and warrants the need for

innovative attributes of leadership and opined that ‘right leadership is a prerequisite for a successful business process reengineering (BPR) effort’ (p. 125). The study confirmed that leadership style can affect a BPM effort both positively or negatively and suggested the adoption of a pragmatic style to address today’s challenges. Elnaghi (2011) discussed the attributes of strategic leadership and radical change in transforming government organisations. The study claimed the pivotal role that leadership plays in implementation of transformational change in government organisations in developing countries due to socio-cultural factors compared to those in the western countries. The study gives emphasis on the need for different styles of leadership for enhanced decision making and system thinking to achieve seamless intra-agency system interaction. Furthermore, he purported the suitability of transformational leadership style, and visionary leadership with knowledge of emerging innovative technologies to achieve the organisation goals. Along similar lines, Goeke and Antonucci (2013) discussed the aptness of Transactional & Transformational leadership (Bass, 1990) for the deployment of a BPM change programme. Their study concludes that in the manufacturing sector, both transactional & transformational behaviours are exhibited by the same leadership role. Transformation and Transactional leadership model was also used to differentiate between leadership and management by Holloway (2008). The study argued that effective leaders in the context of business processes will balance the managerial (transactional) and leadership (transformational) aspects.

Spangenberg and Theron (2013) revised the original leadership model developed by Burke and Litwin (1992) by incorporating ‘openness, adaptability, futuristic leadership, comprehensiveness, and outcomes’ (p. 43) to handle challenges posed by BPM. The revised model attempted to provide clear differences between transformational and transactional leadership.

The only study exclusively focused towards understanding leadership behaviours in BPM projects was presented by Sutcliffe (1999). Sutcliffe argued the validity of the transactional and transformational leadership model to explain leadership effectiveness in BPM projects. The study applied Flamholtz’s leadership effectiveness model (Flamholtz & Randle, 1990) that incorporates leadership tasks, situational factors, and leadership styles. The model explained leadership behaviour in consideration with the nature of task, style, and the context (situation). The study confirmed that

successful BPM leaders adopt leadership styles in consideration of the situational factors and they perform their leadership tasks in a balanced manner. Sutcliffe's study can be criticised for its limited sample size. Furthermore, it assumes only a single leadership role in a BPM project and ignores the possible emergence of leadership in the BPM team.

Summary Overview and Discussion

Most literature focused towards positioning leadership as a critical success factor for BPM, and a consensus observed the importance of leadership as one of the key success factors (often closely associated with top management support and commitment). While some studies [i.e. Daly (2002) and Edward and Mbohwa (2013)] alluded to different leadership styles as being more relevant, Sutcliffe (1999), Chappell (2000) and Elnaghi (2011) were the only studies that provided a reference to leadership styles. A definition for leadership in BPM is provided by Holloway (2008, p. 117) which states 'a leader is anyone who is capable of exerting influence within the organization, and that is everyone, because 'you cannot not influence' other people'. Cha et al. (2015, p. 1763) referred to leadership as a 'factor that positively influenced the project's goal'.

Though 'Leadership' is a well-defined discipline, and there are numerous leadership theories that could be used to define the nature of leadership in BPM initiatives, the current literature on leadership in the BPM context fail to provide a comprehensive definition of "BPM Leadership" or "Leadership in the BPM context". The papers were further reviewed to analyse which viewpoints of leadership they came from (see Table 4) - only 8 papers provided some information supporting this analysis.

It is evident that transactional and transformational leadership theory had received more attention than other frameworks/theories. The literature on leadership in the context of BPM considers the behavioural and situational aspects and the interrelationship with organisational external and internal environments. However, the relevance and suitability of these theories to explain leadership in today's contemporary business environment can be challenged. The complexities associated with the dynamic nature of corporate environment, knowledge driven economies, improved technology

competencies of staff, and increasing globalisation requires a fresh understanding of the role of leadership and how leadership manifests in BPM initiatives.

Insert Table 4 about leadership theories here

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Our quest to understand the notion of leadership within the Business Process Management literature resulted in the identification and analysis of 27 research papers. The results of the systematic literature review identified a dearth of research in the area of leadership characteristics and its manifestation in Business Process Management. Although leadership is acknowledged as one of the key success factors of BPM, the literature does not yet provide a solid definition or conceptualisation of leadership in the BPM context. Current literature inadequately discusses and describes the nature, type, and characteristics of the leadership roles that can influence the outcomes of a BPM initiative.

To date, inadequate attention has been given to explain the types and styles of leadership that the BPM teams should adopt to improve the success of process improvement endeavours. Given the observed consensus of the importance of leadership in BPM, and given that leadership is a complex phenomenon, with many internal and external aspects that interact and influence leadership behaviours in BPM environments, the need to understand what it (precisely) is, how it manifests within BPM initiatives, and how it influences BPM success (or failure) is a justifiable area for further work. We thus make a call for action to future BPM researchers to address this and propose the following research agenda; *How is Leadership in the BPM context different (if at all?), How can leadership in BPM be defined and operationalised? Can existing leadership theories adequately describe the complex leadership roles within BPM efforts? If so, what leadership styles would best suit different BPM initiatives given their contextual differences?*

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TABLE & FIGURES

Table 1: Search Keywords

	Keywords	Synonyms			
1	Leadership	Sponsor	Champion	Leader	
2	Characteristics	Behaviour	Attributes	Qualities	Traits
3	Business Process Management	Business Process Reengineering	Business Process Change	Business Process Improvement	

Table 2: List of Subject Areas and Search Sources

Subject area	Domain	Databases	Journals	Conferences	Search Engine
Leadership	Organisation -al Behaviour Project Management	EBSCOhost ABI/INFORM Emerald Insight WoS/SCOPUS	Leadership Quarterly Journal of Management		Google Scholar
Business Process Management	Information Systems Project Management	IEEE Xplore Digital Library ACM Digital Library AIS electronic library (AISEL) ABI/INFORM Emerald Insight Science Direct WoS/SCOPUS	European Journal of Information Systems ² Information Systems Journal ² Information Systems Research ² Journal of AIS ² Journal of Information Technology ² Journal of MIS ² Journal of Strategic Information Systems ² MIS Quarterly ³ BPMJ Project Management Journal	Americas Conference on Information Systems [AMCIS] Australasian Conference on Information Systems [ACIS] European Conference on Information Systems [ECIS] Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences [HICSS] International Conference on Information Systems [ICIS] Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems [PACIS]	Google Scholar

Table 3: Search Queries

	Search String	Search Field(s)	
1st Iteration	(leadership OR sponsor OR “champion” OR “leader”) AND (“business process management” OR “business process reengineering” OR “business process change” OR “business process improvements”)	Title	Abstract
2nd Iteration	(leadership OR sponsor OR “champion” OR “leader”) AND (Characteristics OR Behaviour OR Attributes OR Qualities OR Traits) AND (“business process management” OR “business process reengineering” OR “business process change” OR “business process improvements”)	Title	Abstract

³ Senior Scholars’ Basket of Journals (<http://aisnet.org/?SeniorScholarBasket>)

Table 4: Leadership Theories in BPM

Article	Leadership Theories						
	Flamholtz LE Framework (Flamholtz and Randle, 1990)	Visionary Leadership Theory (Sashkin, 1987)	Transformational & Transactional Leadership (Avolio et al., 1999)	Egalitarian leadership (Bass et al., 1990)	Situational Leadership Theory (Hersey et al., 2001)	Evolutionary Leadership Pragmatic Style (Van Vugt, 2006)	Burke and Litwin Leadership Model (1992)
Sutcliffe (1999)	√						
Chappell (2000)		√					
Elnaghi (2011)			√				
Abdolvand, Albadvi, and Ferdowsi (2008)				√	√		
Edward and Mbohwa (2013)						√	
Goeke and Antonucci (2013)			√				
Spangenberg and Theron (2013)							√
Holloway (2008)			√				

Figure 1: Chronological Status of Research in BPM Leadership

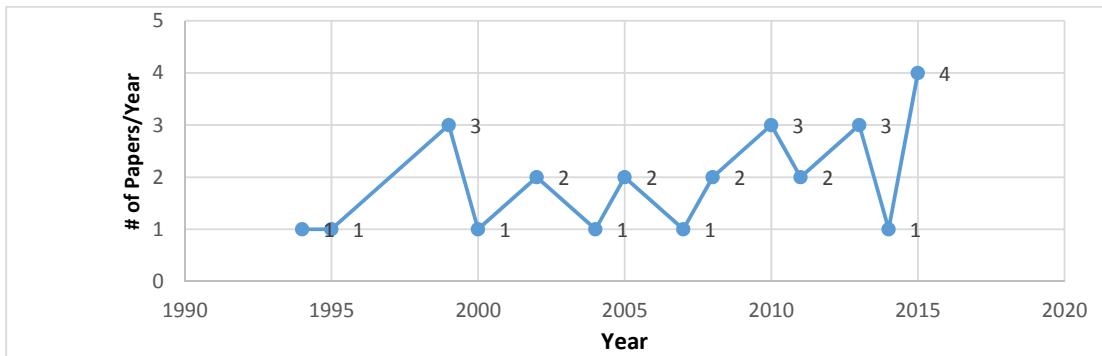


Figure 2: Geographical Distribution of Literature

