



Rule Observatory

Being agile with standard software

Will I buy a house or rent a house was a question that I asked myself one year ago. Now that a decision has been made, many more questions need an answer. What are the best table chairs? The expensive classic design chair — the IKEA version that sits well for two hours. How many chairs do I need? How long do we sit? Is a table chair a fashion item, and is it likely that I want other chairs within five years?

Bottom line is: what flexibility and agility do I need? If I have a big party with many guests is it okay that some guests do not have the best chair? Is there a risk in not being able to sell my house within three months? Each decision affects many other decisions. The expensive chairs limit my remaining budget; the cheaper chairs allow me to refurnish within five years.

In my role as a professional in IT and expert in business rules, the need for flexibility and agility is a real business driver. We are willing to pay more for flexibility in IT. Many organizations have experienced that IT is not flexible. Bespoke software is expensive, and changes are even more expensive. Flexible solutions are less efficient, more complex and risky to develop ... but it's important. We want it. The society individualizes. Our customers expect full compliance, and the board expects transparency of business results (or is it the other way around?).

So we are willing to pay extra for flexibility in software systems. We do flexible business process, introduce flexible reporting, we do more with parameters ... and the next step is? Yes, business rules are a logical next step because they define your decisions and affect business results directly. New product offerings, marketing campaigns, and a well-defined feedback loop from service to offering will directly influence your business results in a positive way.

But adding true flexibility in the software platform of an organization is more than just adding business rules, agreed?

- Many rule changes involve changes to the information needs.
- Changes to information needs effect webforms, data entry screens, and reports.
- New information may require an extra process to gather the information from others, meaning it affects an information chain, meaning more people are involved, meaning more time is needed.

Due to all these complex dependencies, business rule changes may sometimes feel like old-fashioned, inflexible, unpredictable IT projects.

Some say that I am an apostate or deserter of the business rules community.

Well, I am definitely not a believer in business rules. I want to learn from experience and adjust my methods based on what worked and what did not work. I also like to think about new ways, formulate a hypothesis, and test how it works.

My hypothesis is that business rules will not create a breakthrough in making organizations more flexible and agile. The breakthrough in the coming decade will be out-of-the-box (OOB) software products that are delivered to us as a SAAS service, a mobile APP, and a cloud-based solution. Other booming words related to this trend are COTS, packaged solutions, pay per use, software on demand. I hear you think: Big Data? Internet of Things? No, not related per se, but services for these trends will of course be offered using standard software products with out-of-the-box functionality.

These solutions standardize a best practice to deal with a specific kind of knowledge (assessment, planning, advise) in a specific domain (retail, traffic management, logistics). Examples are: Salesforce for sales processes, Shopify for retail, Amadeus for travelling, Sharepoint for document management, VisionWaves for operational intelligence.

These products standardize an end-to-end process. They are not very good at business rules. It would be good if they worked on that. Become more model-driven. But they are very cheap! Much cheaper than bespoke software. So if I just buy the cheapest table chairs; I save money so that I can buy new ones when they do not meet my needs anymore ... that is also flexibility.

And one day we will get back to business rules. Because out-of-the-box solutions standardize best practices and a standard way of doing things is best described as a set of rules. Some clients want to know about these rules ... or change them!



So there is a future for business rules. Business rules will remain a critical component for every business. Organizations that know what they do, how they do it, motivate their decisions, and

adjust based on feedback will be more successful. That is managing a business. If you configure your discounts in Shopify are you managing business rules? No, you are managing your discounts! You are just back in business using standard software.

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