



BPMF Review of the Forthcoming BizAgi Xpress

Overview

BizAgi Xpress (available for download at www.bizagi.com) represents a radical new offering in the BPM Suites (BPMS) arena. It offers a comprehensive BPMS delivering ease of use and, most importantly, a price point that should be acceptable to even the smallest enterprises (a very low \$100 per user). Putting that another way, traditional BPMS products target major organizations – assuming an IT savvy implementation environment and a price tag normally associated with enterprise software deployment. BizAgi Xpress challenges that notion, enabling small businesses and departmental solutions to get up and running without the big expense; for \$10K or less in software costs, a firm can get up and running with a fully functional BPM environment.

BizAgi Xpress incorporates most of the key functionality of the high end BizAgi BPMS (including multi-language/time-zone support), but is limited to 100 users. As the organization grows, or usage becomes more widespread, the BPMS environment can move up to the “Standard” and “Enterprise” editions of the environment. In these more sophisticated environments, functionality delivered includes failover and clustering support, automated testing and managed deployment for complex scenarios.

The product extends the success achieved with the widely adopted BPMN-compliant BizAgi Process Modeler (over 250,000 people have downloaded the free modeler). Users can now execute the models developed in the free modeler, enhancing them create effective process driven applications, coordinating both people and systems. This solution promises a “no code” approach, enabling business people to create powerful applications and associated management reports with little or no IT support.

It’s About the Process

First, it is worth mentioning that BizAgi Xpress probably provides the most extensive support for BPMN available in the market today. That is important because BPMN effectively covers all the potential patterns of process coordination. While many *modeling* tools provide full functional support for BPMN (all the different types of Events, Activities and Gateways), *BPMS execution environments* are usually extremely limited in terms of their support for these patterns. Most BPMS products incorporate proprietary workarounds to support the limited set of patterns they target (i.e. support is defined through extensive dialog boxes that must be configured appropriately rather than driven at the level of the process model). It’s like having a keyboard with half the keys missing. In our assessment of products, it is rare to find BPMS products that support more than 20% of BPMN functionality (limited to a few Activity types, simple split/joins and perhaps one or two event types). In the case of BizAgi Xpress, that coverage is about 90% (of the object types in the BPMN specification). And some of those features dramatically extend the potential for innovative process architectures (especially the Signal Event type), enabling a more dynamic and agile business process infrastructure.

BizAgi Studio (the version of the Modeler in BizAgi Xpress) provides a business friendly wizard that eases the development process for creating application into several stages – create BPMN compliant models; identify process data and associated views (forms are defined at the data level); associate these views with process activities; create any necessary business rules; map business services (integrate any related Web Services); and deploy/execute. Each stage is oriented toward a “no code” approach, enabling business people to create their desired application using only graphical tools.

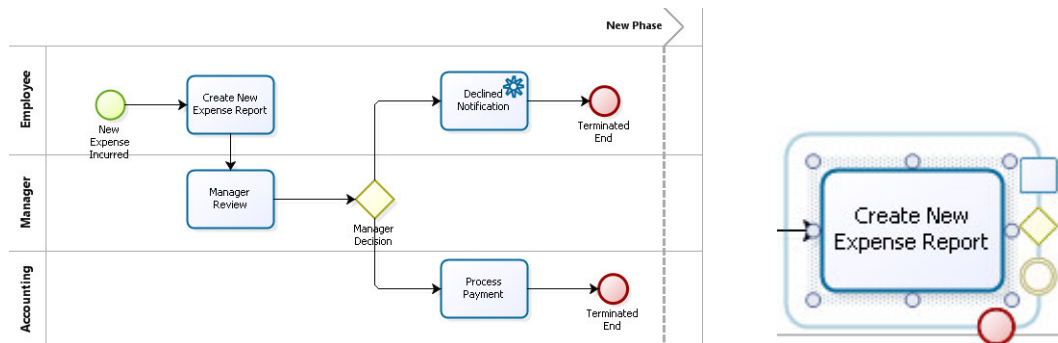


Figure 1 – the Process Modeling environment uses an Intelisense capability (pictured right)

The code-base of BizAgi Studio in the launch version of BizAgi Xpress derives from the original BPMS (not the popular BPMN modeling tool mentioned earlier). However, similar “intelisense” functionality enables users with little experience or exposure to the BPMN standard to rapidly create compliant models. As an initial flow object drops onto the modeling canvas (e.g. Start Event), valid Event/Activity/Gateway objects are presented – simply click on the relevant shape and drag it off. The new shape automatically connects to the first one. This functionality makes the Studio process modeler extremely easy to use. It is then a question of converting the new shape to the correct type (for the behavior sought), transforming an Activity to an embedded Sub-Process for instance, or an Intermediate Event into a Timer or Signal.

We understand that the next major release of BizAgi Xpress will incorporate the newer BizAgi Process Modeler, bringing a number of enhanced usability features (e.g. undo, redo, etc). We are hoping that this will include automatic assignment of Roles to the Activities using the BPMN Swim Lanes (currently this is a little arduous on large models using the Activity property dialog).

Reflecting the Data

A separate tool creates the data structure that processes reference. This wizard-driven tool creates Entity-Relationship style diagrams, enabling to describe the “Entities” that processes will access (which act as the containers for variables). For example, in our Expense Report example, the detail of the Expense Report data will need to be stored somewhere and related an Employee Entity (the claimant). These data models are reusable across processes; simplifying the overall effort of reflecting the domain and building sophisticated applications, (most other BPM Suites create individual process-level variables which must then always be mapped back to external applications or precisely mapped to other processes). This approach allows a number of processes to share data more easily.

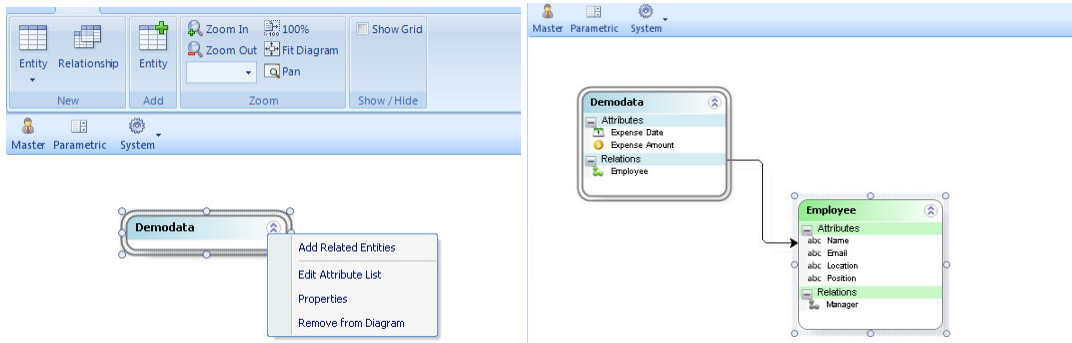


Figure 2 – Two Snapshots of the Data Modeling Environment

BizAgi Xpress includes a forms designer that delivers a WYSIWYG approach in creating complex forms. Forms are effectively views onto the Entity Structure. These views are then associated with Process Activities (and shared across Processes). As shown below, the forms designer layout is quite simple; on the left are the defined process variables (XPath), while the form palette is on the right. Simply dragging and dropping a data element on to the form palette binds the form level input field with the data. While the Forms Designer is quite easy to use, we hope to see further enhancements around form layouts, defining templates, stronger support for CSS, and the ability to place images on forms.

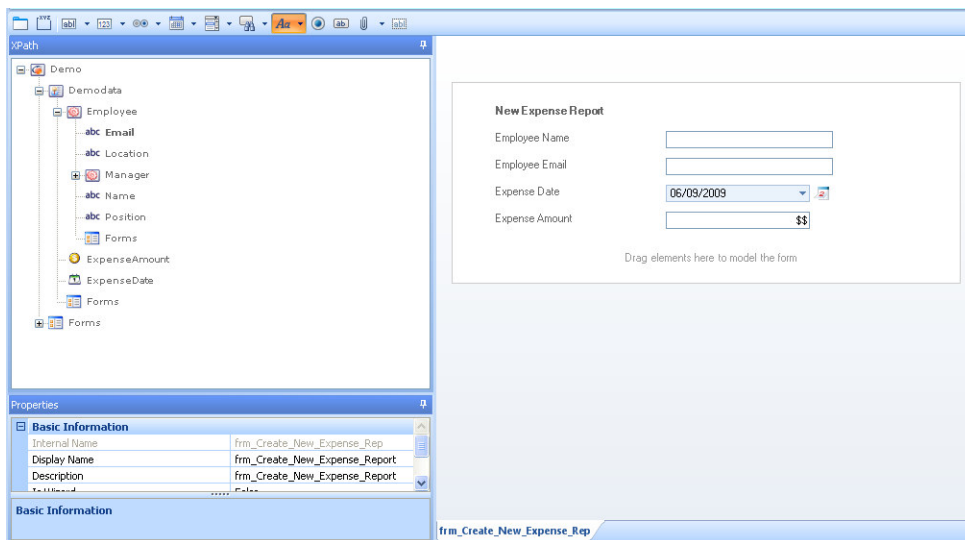


Figure 3 - The Forms Designer

Wizard for Events, Rules, Work Assignment and Integration

The product provides another wizard to configure Activity Events and create reusable Business Rules. Activity Events define the actions for automated steps. For example, the Activity Event below represents an email notification to an employee for a declined expense report. Email templates are also reusable across the processes of an application.

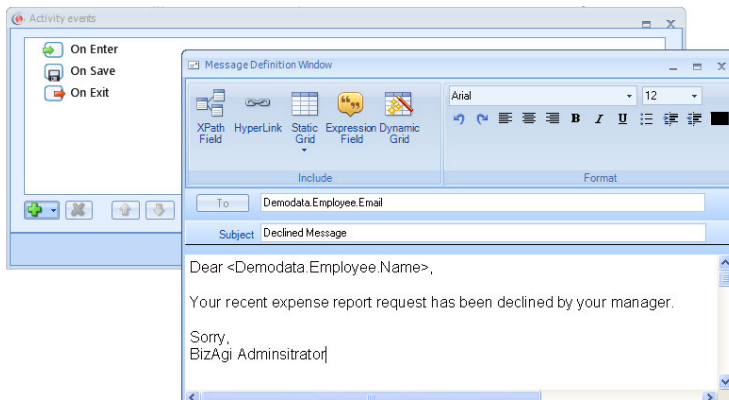


Figure 4 – Event definition for an Automated Activity that generates an email notification

Business Rules define the behavior of a Gateway (Decision). Again, a codeless Expression Editor is provided that leverages the core data definitions. In the future, we hope would like to see enhancements allowing users to create custom extensions to the Expression Editor functions.

Role Assignment of Activities to Roles/Groups is supported by yet another wizard. In our Beta version, each Activity is set individually, but we understand that BizAgi is planning on supporting direct assignment via the process model swim lanes. For dynamic participant assignment, the Expression Editor facilitates assignment based on a process variable or business rule. Rather than having to navigate to the Roles structure to add a new Role, we would like to see mechanisms included to interactively add new roles from within the assignment wizard.

Integration with third party applications is primarily supported through Web Services. The Integration Wizard provides a GUI that invokes the necessary WSDLs, displaying available methods. Selecting the desired method, the wizard assists in mapping the required Web Service data with the Entity data structure in BizAgi Xpress. For Web Services that require complex input and output data types, the BizAgi Entity data model may require supporting structures.

Having configured the process application, BizAgi Xpress also provides a **Work Portal** (which the developer can use for testing before deployment). The Work Portal enables end users to initiate cases and access their tasks/forms. It includes managerial and administrative features such as the ability to review individual cases, view analytic reports, and define users/role management, etc. It also includes the ability to create custom reports and set portal layouts for the end user. All these portal web parts will work within other portal products, such as MS SharePoint.

Summary

BizAgi Xpress provides enterprise class functionality with a very low cost of entry. The wizard based approach for creating process applications is only going to get better (if the development path of their Process Modeler is anything to go by). As far as we are aware, BizAgi Xpress is unique in the BPM market with its run time support for the BPMN Signal Event type and model driven “Compensating Activities” in long running processes. The Signal Event support, working with the shared Data Structure mechanisms, will have a massive impact on the flexibility and adaptability that is possible (better enabling Case Management functionality). Along with the rest of the product functionality, BizAgi Xpress enables sophisticated end-users, business analysts and developers to create loosely-coupled, process-driven application environments (without coding).