Becoming a Business Process Expert:
Podcast Link and Transcription

Jon Reed interviews Marco ten Vaanholt of the SAP BPX Community
Hosted by Jon Franke, News Editor, SearchSAP.com

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Summary:
Continuing his ongoing podcast series with SearchSAP, Jon Reed interviews Marco ten Vaanholt, Global Director of the SAP BPX Community, for a compelling look at the changing SAP skill set and what it takes to become a "Business Process Expert." During the podcast, Marco describes his work with the SAP BPX community, and how BPX is working collectively to help define the skill set that SAP professionals will need to stay relevant on both the functional and technical side.

Jon Reed notes: Recently, I had the opportunity to interview Marco ten Vaanholt on the topic of “Becoming a Business Process Expert.” We released this interview in podcast format. What follows is the transcription of that podcast. I felt strongly about interviewing Marco because more than any other person I spoke with at TechEd, Marco had the most compelling take on how SAP professionals could take the next steps in their skills evolution. As SAP’s technology platform transforms right in front of our eyes, it’s not always easy to understand how to connect our current skills to where SAP is going. In this podcast, I thought Marco did a terrific job of doing just that. Of course, the SAP skills transformation is more of an ongoing discussion than something you can resolve in one sitting. But this podcast definitely helped me to frame the issues in my own mind - I hope it does the same for those who read the transcript or listen to the podcast.

Jon Franke: Hi, I’m Jon Franke for SearchSAP.com. In today’s podcast, we’ll be talking about the changing landscape for Business Process Experts and what professionals can do to keep up. We’ll also get an update on SAP’s Business Process Expert (BPX) community. Joining us is Jon Reed, SearchSAP.com Careers Expert and President of JonERP.com (www.JonERP.com), and Marco ten Vaanholt, Director of SAP’s BPX community. Thanks for joining us, guys. And with that, we’ll turn it over to Jon Reed to get us started.

Jon Reed: Welcome to this podcast interview with our special guest, Marco ten Vaanholt, Global Director of the SAP BPX community. Today, we’re going to talk with Marco about becoming a Business Process Expert and how to make sure your skills keep pace with SAP’s product evolution. I was recently able to attend a standing room-only presentation Marco did at SAP TechEd 2007 on this very topic.

Marco, along with the entire BPX community, has done some very innovative thinking in this area, and we’re going to try to get to the heart of some of those insights today. This podcast is hosted by SearchSAP and was made possible by a joint collaboration between SearchSAP, my site JonERP.com, and B2B Workforce, an SAP Premiere Partner. Marco, thanks for joining us today.
Marco ten Vaanholt: No problem. I’m looking forward to this interview.

Reed: Let’s get started by asking how you got your start in SAP and how you wound up in your current role as the Global Director of the BPX community.

Ten Vaanholt: It was quite a ride, actually. I’ve only been with SAP for about one and a half years now. I came from Yahoo, where I managed their global advertising/banner advertising system. So, when I started with SAP I came into the role of managing and building up a solution management office really focused on delivering collaborative technologies to our communities for SAP’s Developer Network. And one of the projects which was being discussed when I joined was to start a, what we called at that time, a Business Process Analyst community. We wanted to start a community which was adjacent to the SDN community, simply because we did a few surveys in the SDN community asking, “Well, what is your role?” And we found out that about twenty percent of our total SDN audience really had one foot in IT and one foot in business.

So, we started the BPX community as a grassroots initiative, with only a bunch of people working on top of their existing jobs, in May of 2006. And, naturally, that whole grassroots initiative evolved as the BPX community as it is today. What happened is, originally we launched it in a sneak preview mode during Sapphire in 2006. Then, we really launched it during TechEd 2006 with about 35,000 members. And then, we really tried to start the engines during TechEd 2006, and the momentum which we have gotten today has been enormous.

Reed: For those listeners who aren’t fully aware of the BPX community yet, tell us about how this community has grown and why you think it’s been such a compelling website for SAP professionals so far.

Ten Vaanholt: Yes, so let me just first touch upon a few things on the growth. We had about 75,000 members in the first year ending 2006. Today we have more than 200,000 members—actually as of this morning, a little bit over 200,000. And we grew from about three industry forums at the beginning of 2007, to 15 industry forums to date. And we’re going to grow to about 20 industries by year-end. We’re not only covering the industry-specific forums in the BPX space, we’re also covering what we call the “horizontal landscape,” such as the SRM, CRM, SCM, the organizational change management landscape, and GRC, etc. So what we’re trying to do is both have a horizontal as well as a vertical approach.

I think when you touch upon the phenomenal growth of the community, why it has been so compelling, it has a few aspects. The first thing is that people are trying to keep up with this new BPP/eSOA revolution. People are trying to understand, “What is it, and what does it mean for me?” And I think that the BPX community helps them in understanding what it could mean for them.

The second part is that we have seen a huge momentum and uptake with our partners. So the partners of SAP, whether it’s tier one, tier two, or tier three partners, are really trying to help their consultancy workforce to migrate and evolve into this new BPP space as well. And what they have found is that they can lower the total cost of ownership of education via this notion of community learning. So collaborative learning actually lowers the TCL of the partners.

Now, that same aspect has been seen with our customers, so our customers are facing the same challenges and same questions in terms of, “What is eSOA, what does it mean to me? How do I need to shape my organization of the future?” And the BPX community is trying to find...
collectively an answer to how they can shape this organization of the future. So in essence, not only customers but also partners, as well as independents, are finding a collaborative space where they can talk about the future of what business process platforms can do for them and what is needed to take advantage of those business process platforms.

**Reed:** We should mention for those SDN listeners out there that to join the BPX community, all you have to do is to click on the BPX option in your SDN profile and you can join the BPX community instantly.

**Franke:** Marco, how does the BPX community influence SAP? Is there a formal process?

**Ten Vaanholt:** Absolutely. Similar to what we’re doing with SDN and SAP NetWeaver product management, it’s our intent to utilize the same synergies, so we’re working closely with the industry solution managers, as well as the application solution managers. And they utilize the BPX community as a feedback forum into the product management cycle. So, what we are doing is we’re utilizing the BPX community as a feedback channel back into SAP, and that’s the first process which is happening.

The second process, of course, is also this notion that both our partners, as well as SAP, use the BPX community as a launch platform for new product introductions or new solution introductions. So, imagine that as the BPX community grows--and as I said, we’re growing with about 15-20,000 members a month--this notion of an increasing, growing community has also much more leverage from ISMs (Industry Solution Managers) and ASMs (Application Solution Managers) launching their products inside the community, so you know at the earliest moment what’s new and then utilize the community on understanding what’s hot and what’s not, right? And sometimes you say to people, “Well, with this increasing amount of growing information--exponentially-growing information--how can your brain keep up with all this stuff?” And I can’t. But, what I do is I actually utilize the community to help me filter what’s hot and what’s not.

**Reed:** So one of the major goals of the BPX community, and one of your major goals in your presentations, is to help SAP professionals and project teams transition toward teams of Business Process Experts. It sounds like a pretty cool job title to have on your business card. But I don’t think everyone’s always sure what it means. Let’s start by defining the term. As you see it, what is a Business Process Expert, and why are they going to be so important to the SAP implementations of the future?

**Ten Vaanholt:** So, actually, that’s a very intriguing question because when we started with the BPX community, we didn’t know that this question was so prominent and would be one of the most asked recurring questions. So we asked the community to define what a Business Process Expert would do, whether it’s now or in the future, and out of that community project, they came up with a definition themselves. So, I’m just going to read the definition which they came up with.: “The Business Process Expert has both the business knowledge and IT stamina to make business process innovation happen in real time by adapting, composing, and executing business processes using best practices, composition software, and enterprise services.”

One of the things which they have defined--and there are many different descriptions of what a Business Process Expert is in our getting-started area--but, most of the people who have identified themselves as Business Process Experts always say, “I have one foot in IT and one foot in business. I’m almost a marriage counselor between business and IT.”
And one of the things, what we have seen, is that this BPX role is a professional role which is an evolving role from roles like a Business Analyst in the past, an Application Consultant, or on the IT side, a Process Developer or an IT Manager or an Enterprise Architect or a Junior Enterprise Architect. And on the business side, perhaps a Business Process Manager or a Business Process Architect. It’s really, truly an evolution of several other roles. And the BPX role is an umbrella role. I do want to make that clear to people: it’s not one single category.

Reed: It seems like a lot of different roles can lead you closer to the Business Process Expert skill set. Your presentations on becoming a Business Process Expert are pretty riveting. At one point I saw every one in the room snap to attention: it was when you and your co-presenters touched on why both ABAP and core functional configuration skills are going to go away. I guess there’s nothing quite like the shock of realizing your job as you know it may eventually go away, to get your attention after a long day of technical sessions.

Marco, can you tell us why you think ABAP work and IMG configuration work are going to either go away or evolve? And how long do SAP professionals have in these areas to make transitions to broader business process skill sets?

Ten Vaanholt: Yes, so let me rephrase the question a little bit, Jon, because I don’t think that ABAP and core ABAP programmers will go away. I think Puneet perhaps said that just for the shock factor (this was Puneet Suppal of Capgemini). But, I do think that core skills around ABAP will not just cut it in the future. You need to have composition skills. So, one of the things I do want to rephrase is, just core ABAP knowledge and skill sets will not be enough in the future of managing BPP platforms. You need to get composition skills, and the sooner the better, you know? These are things that SAP is coming out with their business process platform; everybody--old customers--are seeming to go upgrade to ERP 6.0, and ERP 6.0 is really truly our first business process platform. So, to all of those ABAPers and really hardcore IT folks: What you know today is just not enough; composition skills will matter in the future.

And one of the other notions is that SAP is coming out with their composition environment, and their composition environment is still fairly technical, but, in the future as the composition environment will evolve, it will not be just for Technical Developers. Business Process Experts and Enterprise Architects will really utilize the composition environment for their day-to-day work. So, one of the things I do want to mention there is that these are the more technical skills which you need to have as either an ABAPer or a Basis Consultant.

But, another thing is that you also need to evolve your soft skills, especially for the IT folks. If you want to have one foot in IT and one foot in business, you need to know a little bit about the business speak as well as the IT speak. You need to know how you can have the capability of changing organizations by implementing really good solutions. You need to know how you can convince executive management to buy into your project. So, another thing which will become increasingly important for those types of folks is these formal process modeling skills, whether it’s in the historical perspective, Visio; in the future, you’ll have all kinds of modeling tools which allow you to model much faster.

And I actually think that some of these Basis and ABAPers have an advantage over the more Business Analyst folks because they know how to use these technical modeling tools today. A lot of people have some knowledge around Visual Composer; they have some knowledge around the IDS Scheer ARIS tool - and now it was recently renamed - but, basically, the process modeling tool which IDS Scheer has developed.
So, one of the things which I have seen is that some of these “techies” who are or have been wandering between these two lines have a little bit of an extra advantage. But, nonetheless, they should start touching up their soft skills, their modeling skills, and also, of course, their knowledge about industry profits, the sooner the better.

**Reed:** What I hear you saying is that folks should step back from an alarmist view of what’s going to happen, and look at it more along these lines: SAP is making a transition to business process platform along with its customer base, and our job as SAP professionals is to anticipate that and evolve our skills along the same lines.

**Ten Vaanholt:** Absolutely. You know, I can be very futuristic, but I actually believe that the new generation, the 20- to 30-year-olds, have also an advantage on the older generation, the 30- to 50-year-olds, because they’re more internet-savvy as they’re also more tech-savvy. But they still have this notion of business as well. When I go to MBA programs nowadays, I’m surprised by how well these MBA people have one foot in IT and one foot in business.

I do think that a lot of those folks who are in their 20’s do not have any notion on how a business works. So, that is where the advantage lies for a lot of the either IT or business folks, and all they need to do is really brush up on a few things, such as their modeling skills, their soft skills, practical SAP knowledge, of course, if it’s related to the SAP World. But also, business process management, methodology knowledge, as well as the use of business process management tools, such as Six Sigma.

Another thing which I think is becoming increasingly important is if you want to become a really good BPXer, you really have to understand what Web 2.0 and community can mean for you to evangelize the solutions you create for your customers. More and more companies are going global. How do you evangelize a solution which you just built and which needs to be dispersed globally? How do you do that?

One of the good things about community is that you can say, “Hey, community. I’m in a beta for this specific solution. Please give me your feedback so that it can become good faster.” So that’s one of the things you need to understand as well. How can you use blogging? How can you use Wikis? How can you use collaborative forums to improve your overall acceptance of the solutions you built?

**Reed:** Marco, one of the points that I really like that you made in your discussion just now is that in the past, the only way to get this kind of information on new releases was to actually put yourself through courses at SAP America. And I think what’s interesting now, in addition to the new certifications that SAP is developing, is that consultants and professionals can avail themselves of a lot of these things in their free time, even something like the composition environment, where you can actually work on that real-time in the SDN community. One of the messages you’re trying to get across today is that a lot of this is simply a mindset shift on the part of the consultant to say, “I’m going to go out and get this information which is available to me, online, today.”

**Ten Vaanholt:** Yes, I think there is a two-fold approach: if one is consuming information, I think the other part is participating to create information. I think it is increasingly important for you as an individual to share your collective good—to share your mind as a collective good. I do think that a lot of Business Analysts and Application Consultants from the past have had their knowledge and their good either in their project team or on their laptop. But one of the things, what we’re trying to do with the BPX community, is to open up that landscape.
I do make a distinction between sharing processes at process level zero versus process level three. So, one of the things which I think needs to be clear is that I do believe that there will be tons of collaboration on commoditized process optimization. So, a lot of the applications which, from a historical perspective were delivered by SAP or by other vendors, are most likely commoditized processes or have commoditized processes within their application suite. And what I’ll see is a lot of these BPXers of the future will partially focus on how to utilize those commoditized processes as best as possible. So we will see tons of collaboration inside the BPX community on the commoditized process level.

However, on the more strategic process and strategic disruptive innovation level (which I more call “level three processed knowledge”), I do not think there will be that much of collaboration in an open-space environment. I actually feel that there will be collaboration more in a secluded area, and then once they have figured out a good solution or a good set of solutions, they might want to share it with the community to get additional feedback.

Reed: One of the things I think you did a great job of in this podcast so far was articulating how the technical SAP professional could start anticipating these trends. Let’s look at it from the functional side for a moment. We have a lot of functional folks whose classic role has focused on IMG configuration and configurating tables. How do you see the functional role evolving, and what are some of the next steps a functional consultant can take to become more savvy as a Business Process Expert?

Ten Vaanholt: That’s a good question. I think, you know, Gartner calls them “Business Process Analysts of the future.” We call them “Business Process Experts.” I think the name is a little bit different, but they will do exactly the same. I think the most appropriate candidate for the future of a BPXer, is somebody who is between IT and business. What we have seen so far is the Business Analyst of the past and the Application Consultant of the past: What they did is the Business Analyst defined the existing process and the future process, handed it over to the Application Consultant; the Application Consultant would set the flags and then, if customization was needed, throw it over the wall. There was a long process.

In the future, with the composition environment and other business process platform modeling tools, you need to have the ability to utilize the modeling tools as best as possible. So there will be a need, from a business-functional angle, to understand IT and technical requirements much more in the future. That’s the first part. The second part is there will be an angle of process discovery. So, there is this notion of enterprise service repositories, and I believe, together with the Enterprise Architect, the Business Process Expert will do much more process discovery and reuse in the future.

Another thing, which I think will become increasingly more important aspect of a BPXer from a functional perspective, is this notion of “simulation.” This is all futuristic, right? But, I believe that simulation, especially when you do it in an environment of disruptive innovation, will become increasingly important. On top of that, the need to learn a good solid modeling tools and to get that experience on how to use a tool and how to use a tool to a certain extent so that you can accelerate an implementation. I feel that that is increasingly important from a functional perspective. And on the BPX community, we mentioned a ton of different tools which a BPXer of the future could or should use.

Franke: We’ve talked a lot about technical skills versus business or “soft” skills, and how technical people have to continue to improve their soft skills. Now, for technical skills, people
can take specific trainings or get certifications. But what are some of the ways people can improve their soft skills?

**Ten Vaanholt:** I think, you know, I’m working really closely with SAP educational partners as well as outside universities. I think where the IT folks really can develop their skills set is on the soft skills side. And you can take tons of soft skill courses, right? How to present in public, how to address executives, assertive management, how to do organizational change management. And I think, for a lot of IT folks, it’s also an interesting area. I’ve heard a lot of people at TechEd when I spoke to them, and they’re really interested to evolve their skills in that specific arena.

I think the other side is, you can take business process modeling skills, but when you’re sitting next to a business owner, how you carry yourself, how you position yourself as a change agent, is as important as developing the solution itself. I sometimes talk about: When you’re effective, it’s not only how efficiently you created the solution, it’s also multiplied by acceptance to the second degree. It’s very important not only to build a good solution, but then also distribute it amongst the organization in a way that it gets accepted by everybody in the organization saying, “This is the right solution for us at the right time, at the right moment in the right place.”

And how you do that—and there’s some tips and tricks. And I really believe that a lot of the “techies” can enhance their soft skills, especially in that arena. I think on top of it, you need to keep up-to-date with a lot of the technologies which were out there. Not only just SAP technologies, but what type of Web 2.0 technologies are out there? What type of SOA-enabled technologies are out there, which you can use and utilize to really create something cool or fancy for the future, as well as helps your organization make a better business of itself.

**Reed:** You mentioned “disruptive innovation” a couple of times, and I don’t want to put you on the spot too much, but the one thing that always trips me up about it is that one of SAP’s big messages about their software in terms of upgrades and such is innovation without disruption. I’ve always wanted to understand how the disruptive innovator fits into the model of innovation without disruption. Is it basically like disruptive innovation within a confined context? Is that the idea?

**Ten Vaanholt:** Yes. I think—do you know this notion of nondeterministic ability? So, you have the ability to adjust more dynamically to external events which have an effect on your organization. I think, you know, when I talk about disruptive innovation, it can be both inside-out and outside-in. So, in the B2B space, I think that you need to distinguish, as I said before, between commodity processes as well as strategic processes. So one of the things you can do is you can define a new process, and by defining a new process you are disruptive to the market; or, the market is disruptive, and because the market is disruptive, you need to define a new process.

So, I’ll give you a kind of an example, right? And this is just a hypothetical example, but—and this is an example I gave during the TechEd presentation I did. So, Nike is an apparel company. What they’ve done in the past is, predominantly, sold apparel. Now, they came out with their Nike Swatch Watch, which can do GPS tracking. And if you buy the shoes, then you can do GPS tracking; you can identify where you are when you go cross-country. Ok? And at the moment of sale, you now have the capability when you buy the shoe and the watch to also buy a GPS contract.

Now, Nike probably never had something like that because they were just in the apparel business—they sold apparel. They never sold GPS contracts, which is a mobile contract. Now, imagine that they have the capability when you buy the shoe and the watch to also buy a GPS contract.
same type of sense, and then tailor it a little bit more towards their specific industry. And now they have the ability to be the first in the market to sell a GPS watch connected with their shoes, and that becomes a differentiator in the market of apparel. So, this is a way of utilizing solutions as well as processes which existed in another industry but now are disruptive towards the overall apparel industry. That doesn’t necessarily mean that it is disruptive in the negative sense. It is actually disruptive in the positive sense, right?

Reed: Yes, and in your TechEd presentations, I liked how you distinguished between Business Process Experts that were focused on optimization and efficiency, and those that were focused on disruptive innovation. I hear where you’re going with that now, that basically innovation within a certain context is disruptive but not in a way that affects your efficiency. It’s essentially, as you said, a group of people who are looking to build on whatever business model they have, but perhaps by questioning certain assumptions and bringing, in the case of eSOA, perhaps even mashups from different content providers in industries to see what can be created.

Ten Vaanholt: Yes, and you know the same is happening in the mobile space, which is hugely competitive, where change happens every two months, right? How do you keep up in that mobile space and still have an edge? How does Nokia keep doing what they’re doing? How do they sell three billion phones and are the world-wide leader, and, how do they keep up with that incredible speed of change? Or do they create the speed of change?

Reed: Well, we’ve covered a lot of points in this podcast. Are there any topics on becoming a Business Process Expert or taking advantage of the BPX community that we hadn’t covered yet, that you wanted to get across?

Vaanholt: Yes, there is so much, but I think one of the things that I do want to do is invite people--most of your listeners are already familiar with SDN, but I do think it would be good to scope out what’s already in the BPX community and invite them to the BPX community. The first advice I’d tell most people is: We have a really solid getting-started area, which explains a little bit more about what the role means. Again, it’s an evolving role. I get a ton of questions from people about, “How does this relate to me? How can I get certified?” And a lot of the information is already on the community itself.

On top of that, we have tons of collaborative areas, whether it’s in the Wiki or it’s in the forum areas, where people are helping other people to solve business issues of today. You know, one of the things I do want to mention is that a lot of Application Consultants are not aware that we have a whole ERP upgrade forum where people share information about best practices on ERP upgrades. I think the BPX community, as well as the BPX role, is an evolving role, and as we evolve we invite as many people to share and contribute as well as communicate to us what is needed.

That’s another aspect which I really want to make come across--is that we’re a living thing, you know, we’re just building this city, and we need people’s advice on where we need to build next. And that’s definitely an area where I would like to invite people and communicate and collaborate together with our community evangelists and our community mentors to figure out what the next steps are for this BPX community itself.

Reed: Ordinarily, at the end of the podcast, it’s always hard for me, because I feel like we haven’t covered nearly enough, but, in this case, the whole point of the podcast is simply that there’s an opportunity to actually stop consuming the information about this, and actually get on BPX and get involved. So, I guess that’s going to be our closing message, that the seismic plates
of SAP skill sets may be shifting, but the opportunity is there, like never before, to actively seek out the skills gaps that you might feel in your own skills set and find a solution for it.

On that note, I would like to wish Marco the best of luck building out the BPX community. And hopefully, we’ll see you online soon.

**Ten Vaanholt:** Thank you, Jon and Jon.

**Reed:** I’d like to thank our listeners for joining us today for this podcast interview on becoming a Business Process Expert. This podcast was a joint venture between SearchSAP, and my site, JonERP.com, “Bringing you career answers for SAP professionals.” And with that, I’d like to turn it back to our host, Jon Franke, of SearchSAP.

**Franke:** Well, thanks a lot, Jon and Marco. That does it for this edition of SearchSAP.com’s podcast series on Business Process Experts, skills and resources. Until next time, I’m Jon Franke. Thanks for joining us.

*Editor’s Note: This interview is not a verbatim transcription of the podcast; it was edited for clarity and readability. However, no content from the podcast conversation was removed.*