EXTENDING BUSINESS PROCESS MODELING TOOLS WITH WORKFLOW PATTERN REUSE

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Abstract: For their reuse advantages, workflow patterns are increasingly attracting the interest of both researchers and vendors. However, actual workflow modeling tools do not provide functionalities that enable users to define, query, and reuse workflow patterns properly. In this paper we gather a set of requirements for process modeling tools that aim to support pattern reuse in a direct way. In order to demonstrate the feasibility of these requirements we present a respective implementation project that extends the process modeling tool EPC Tools with pattern reuse functionality.

1 INTRODUCTION

Business Processes and respective workflow models frequently include a variety of fragments (*or recurrent business functions*) which can be understood as self-contained activity blocks with a specific and well-defined semantics (Thom, 2006). As an example consider the evaluation process for price adjustment as depicted in Figure 1. This process includes activities with the following partial order: (a) is a shopping order or not; (b) evaluate request of price adjustment; (c) notify managers about conclusion of evaluation; (d) notify managers about automatic approval. Altogether this process comprises fragments having generic semantics that can be described as a pattern such as decision (activity *a*), notification (activities *c* and *d*), and task execution request (activities *b*). In this paper, we are dealing with the question of how the modeling of processes that include recurrent business functions like notification in Figure 1 can be supported appropriately by a tool.

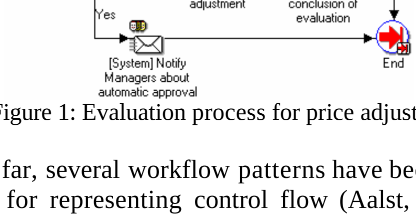

Figure 1: Evaluation process for price adjustment

So far, several workflow patterns have been suggested for representing control flow (Aalst, 2002), data (Russell, 2005), resources (Russell, 2004), interaction (Bradshaw, 2005) and exception handling (Russell, 2006). Yet, these pattern sets have in common that they are relevant for the implementation of a workflow system and the definition of process modeling languages, but they provide only a partial answer to the question of what business functions a modeler has to consider repeatedly in various process models. Usually, such process *fragments* (Flores, 1988), (Medina-Mora, 1992), (Malone, 2004), (Muehlen, 2002), (Bradshaw, 2005) are redesigned for practically every workflow application. Such a procedure can be considered as inefficient, and thus undesirable from a maintenance perspective. While there is some research reported on how metadata can be organized to manage large-scale modeling project (see Thomas and Scheer 2006), we are not aware of any work evidencing the existence of recurrent patterns in real workflow applications as well as their necessity and completeness for the business and workflow process modeling. Beyond that, contemporary workflow modeling tools do not provide functionalities that enable users to define, query, and reuse such patterns in a proper way.

Related to these problems we proposed a set of nine workflow patterns in an early work (Thom, 2006). Each pattern represents a recurrent business function (such as the ones showed in Figure 1) frequently found in business processes. In this paper we present a set of requirements related to reuse of these patterns in business process and workflow modeling tools. Furthermore, we illustrate the feasibility of such support for pattern reuse by an implementation on top of the business process modeling tool EPC Tools (Cuntz and Kindler 2005). EPC Tools is an open source tool for Event-driven Process Chains (EPCs) (Keller, Nüttgens, and Scheer 1992) providing sophisticated simulation and verification facilities. Since EPCs offer similar elements as other business process and workflow modeling languages, the pattern reuse concepts can directly adapted to other process modeling tools.

Against this background, the outline of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 gives an overview of the workflow patterns that we identified in prior research. In particular, we discuss the unidirectional performative and the notification pattern as two examples. Section 3 gathers a set of requirements for a modeling tool that aims to support reuse of these patterns. We present use cases and sequence diagrams for specifying the interaction with the modeler. Section 4 then gives an overview of EPCs and EPC Tools as a background to the implementation project. Section 5, in turn, addresses the requirements of Section 3 in the extension of EPC Tools. Finally, Section 6 concludes the paper and gives an outlook on future research.

2 WORKFLOW PATTERNS

In the context of this paper we use the term workflow pattern to refer to the description of a recurrent business function frequently found in business processes (e.g., notification, decision, approval). We derived a set of 9 patterns from an extensive study based on the literature. Examples of patterns are document approval, question-answering, financial, logistic, unidirectional and bi-directional performative, information, notification and decision patterns. Details on these patterns as well as a classification of them are reported in Thom(2006).

It is out of the scope of this paper to detail the semantics of all these patterns. It is important to note that through the mining of 190 workflow processes we measured the occurrence frequency of each of the workflow patterns in the set of workflow processes analyzed. In general words, the main results of the mining can be summarized as follows:

– There is a high probability that the workflow patterns exist in real workflow processes, i.e., 60% of the analyzed workflow processes include organization-based patterns; 8% include some domain application–based patterns; and 75% include patterns related to such business functions;
– The set of patterns appears to be both necessary and sufficient to model all 190 workflow processes analyzed.
– We identified a set of rules that not only define specific workflow patterns but also show how they are combined with existent control flow patterns (e.g., sequence, XOR-Split).

We illustrate the unidirectional performative and the notification pattern as examples.

2.1 Examples of Workflow Patterns

A block activity is suitable to represent each pattern according to WfMC (2005). The block activity concept is particularly suited because it allows to encapsulate the well-defined semantics and to represent their atomic characteristics. This means that all activities defined inside a block activity pattern must be completed before the superordinated workflow can continue its execution.

Since the patterns representation may require input/output parameters and the block activity concept does not support parameters, the transaction perspective of serialization theory was applied to overcome this limitation (Bernstein, 1987). Accordingly, an input parameter is represented as a database read operation of *one-time-only* readable information. Similarly, an output parameter is represented in the block as a database write operation of *one-time-only* writable information.

We describe the two example patterns as an UML Activity Diagram (using the UML 2.0 notation). The Visual Paradigm for the UML Community Edition based on UML 2.0 was used as an editing tool to design the patterns.

2.2.1 Unidirectional Performative Pattern

A sender uses unidirectional performative messages to request the execution of an activity from a receiver. Figure 2 shows the pattern: an activity execution request results in a work item being assigned to a receiver (i.e., a specific workflow participant responsible for activity execution). After that, the process may continue execution without waiting for a response. Note that the unidirectional performative message does not require a response.

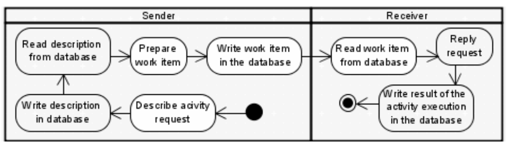

Figure 2: Unidirectional Performative pattern

2.2.2 Notification Pattern

This pattern comprises a notification activity that either informs about the completion of an activity execution or posts news inherent to the respective workflow application (e.g., a notification about the result of an approval process) (cf. Figure 3). In the present approach it is assumed that a notification activity status may eventually be sent if requested.

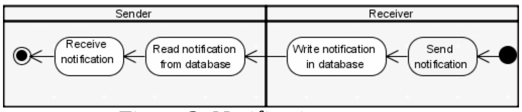

Figure 3: Notification pattern

3 REQUIREMENTS FOR PATTERN REUSE IN TOOLS

This section introduces the requirements for extending a generic business process modeling tool with the workflow patterns introduced in Section 2.

Note that the requirements focus on the design phase of the workflow model assuming that execution issues are handled by a workflow management systems (WfMS). The requirements are specified as use case diagrams and descriptions, and as sequence diagrams illustrating the interactions between objects of some business process modeling tool.

The *use cases diagram* represents the functionality that is expected by users while working with a process modeling tool based on the reuse of workflow patterns. Each use case illustrates a possible interaction between the user and the tool respectively. Such interactions give the behavioral notion of the application. The corresponding *use cases descriptions* are the base for the subsequent specification of the sequence diagrams. Each use case describes possible responses expected by a process design tool to user actions. Finally, the *sequence diagram* map the classes involved in a workflow pattern reuse, as well as their interactions and corresponding methods.

Beyond a pattern repository we need a mechanism to exhibit patterns for selection to the user. At the present, our approach supports manual selection. However, we aim to improve this selection towards a semi-automatical mode by the help of rules that specify patterns interactions and combinations.

Regarding the subsequent UML diagrams the high level of abstraction serves the applicability for different kinds of modeling tools. Specific interface aspects are neglected. The sequence diagrams also present the objects and methods in a way that does not refer to some specific tool (e.g., we do not specify parameters), giving more flexibility for the implementation phase. These aspects are application dependant and must be defined in implementation time.

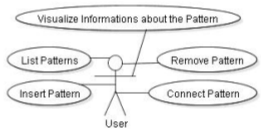

Figure 4: Use cases diagram

Figure 4 shows the actor (user) as well as his possible interactions with the system. It also shows that the tool must provide the patterns stored in an application dependant data structure, in order to be able to respond to the specified use cases. Accordingly, the UML patterns (cf. Section 3) have to be mapped to a corresponding representation in the notation of the tool being extended. Thus, they can be stored as a composition of basic structures of modeling language that is supported by the tool. For each use case a sequence diagram was developed (e.g., list pattern, view pattern, insert patter, connect pattern and remove pattern). Figures 5 and 6, respectively, show sequence diagrams for the two patterns that we use to illustrate the approach.

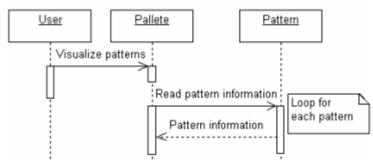

Figure 5: List patterns sequence diagram

Figure 5 presents the sequence diagram for the use case *List Patterns*. The method *Visualize Patterns* is a request made by the *User* to the *Pallete* in order to visualize the workflow patterns stored in the tool. After receiving this message, the *Pallete* lists all stored patterns. For each one, it reads the pattern information and displays a description of the *Pattern* to the user.

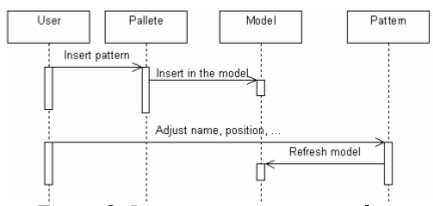

Figure 6: Insert pattern sequence diagram

Figure 6 illustrates the sequence diagram for the use case *Insert Pattern*. It represents the use of the workflow patterns in the modeling of a business process. The *User* selects in the *Pallete* the structure which he wants to add to the *Model*. After the *Pattern* is included in the model, it must be changed according to *User* commands (e.g., pattern name and position adjustment). Each modification in the *Pattern* is informed to the *Model*.

From these sample diagrams as well as the others developed we can obtain the classes and respective methods involved in the implementation of this project. The derived classes are *pallete*, *pattern*, *model* and *element for connection*.

The *Pallete* represents a menu to the user for choosing the pattern he wants to add to the model. This might be a graphic, a button, or a drop down list. The class *Model* represents the business process that the user designs. It contains all modeling structures and their connections and displays it on the screen. The class *Pattern* represents the pattern stored in the format that the tool assumes.. The *Element for connection* identified in the sequence diagram of the use case *Connect Pattern* (used to describe how workflow patterns are connect to each other as well as with other existent structures) represents an modeling element of the tool.

As these requirements refer to the extension of an existing workflow design tool, probably some of the identified classes will already exist, requiring only a mapping between the classes of the project and the classes of the implemented in the design tool. In the subsequent sections, we focus on EPCs as an example of a business process modeling language and EPC Tools as a modeling tool.

4 EPCS AND EPC TOOLS

The Event-driven Process Chain (EPC) is a business process modeling language that captures the temporal and logical dependencies between activities of a business process (Keller, Nüttgens, and Scheer, 1992) and later formalized by different authors (see Mendling and Aalst, 2006). EPCs offer three element types: functions, events, and connectors. Function type elements to represent activities of a business process while event type elements describe the pre- and post-conditions of the functions. Connectors specify complex routing constraints. They must be either a split or a join and define a connector type of either AND, XOR, or OR.

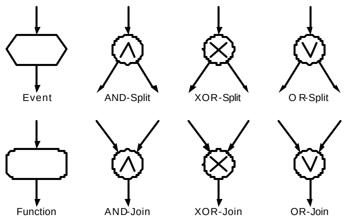

Figure 7: EPC Notation and informal semantics

The different connectors behave as follows. The AND-split activates all subsequent branches in concurrency. The XOR-split represents a choice between one of alternative branches. The OR-split triggers one, two, or up to all subsequent branches. The AND-join waits for all incoming branches to complete, then it forwards control to the subsequent EPC element. The XOR-join merges alternative branches. The OR-join synchronizes all active incoming branches. This feature is called non-locality since the state of all transitive predecessor nodes has to be considered.

Figure 8: Example of an EPC

Figure 8 gives the example of an EPC process model for the workflow process of Figure 1. After the document is read, its type is determined. If it is a shopping order, the manager is notified of automatic approval and a request is sent. If not, the price is adjusted manually and the managers are notified.

The importance of EPCs for business process modeling stems from two facts. First, EPCs are heavily used in practice due to extensive support, e.g. by ARIS toolset of IDS Scheer AG and because it was used as a language for a redocumentation of SAP's enterprise software; see Keller and Teufel (1998). Second, EPCs include OR-joins that pose theoretical challenges due to its non-locality, i.e. it synchronizes only those branches that are active. This feature has in particular stimulated research by Kindler (2006) which resulted in an implementation called EPC tools (Cuntz and Kindler 2005).

EPC tools is among the few tools for business process modeling that are both open source and provide sophisticated simulation and verification features. The simulation facility offers the modeler an interface to propagate cases through the process in order to check whether the behave is described appropriately. Moreover, the verification facility analyzes whether the process is sound (i.e. live and bound) and contact free. EPC Tools is available as a plug-in for the eclipse platform that can easily adapted and extended. Furthermore, it supports the open exchange format EPC Markup Language (EPML), see Mendling and Nüttgens (2006).

5 EXTENDING EPC TOOLS WITH PATTERN REUSE

In this section we describe the extension of EPC Tools with some of the workflow patterns introduced in Section 2. The extension was based on the requirements introduced above. In order to support the patterns we extended the code of the tool.

The new features added follow the general interface design of the tool (e.g., font type, buttons style and labels size). This provides an integration that is almost imperceptible for the user which simplifies the use of the workflow patterns through the tool.

The implementation started with the interface definition. First we defined the position of the patterns in the designer. After that, for each workflow patterns we created a button. To identify that these buttons are related with patterns, it was also added a label *Patterns* in the tool interface.

This implementation covers the use case *Insert Pattern*. As discussed in Section 2 the number of workflow patterns needed for the definition of a process is small (no more than 7 or 9). Thus, the use case *List Patterns* is implemented by the patterns buttons that present to the user the available patterns stored in the tool. As the patterns buttons are visible as soon as the tool is started, the use case *List Patterns* is executed only once when the tool is uploaded. The use case *Visualize information about patterns* is implemented through the patterns buttons too. When the user rolls the mouse over a specific pattern button a tooltip is presented.

To implement the other use cases (*Insert Pattern*, *Connect Pattern* and *Remove Pattern*) the classes identified in the sequence diagram were mapped to corresponding entities that are already available in EPC Tools. First, the class *pallete* had to be added. Second, we mapped the class *workflow pattern* to macros. Each implemented pattern was translated from UML notation to EPCs (see Figure 9). When the user clicks the pattern button the corresponding structure is inserted in the model. This way, it was possible to reuse most of the code for the basic EPC elements. Specific actions that manipulate a pattern when it is inserted in a model are sent to the EPC basic structures (e.g., functions, events, connectors) that compose it.

There are two ways to store a pattern. First, they are hardcoded in the application which is kind of rigid. The second approach stores the macros representing the patterns as EPML external files. This way, the implementation is much more flexible since the external file can be changed without touching the source code. Another advantage of the external EPML files is that the patterns mapping can be implemented with EPC Tools, as it is based on EPML. With this alternative, we can use EPC Tools to model the representation of the pattern in EPC and stores it in an EPML file.

Third, the *model* class was mapped to the respective EPC Tools class. Fourth, the *element for connection* class is captured by basic EPC structures.

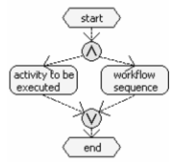

Figure 9: EPC Performative unidirectional pattern

This mapping captures the semantics of the pattern represented in UML activity diagram (cf. Figure 2). The *Start* event comprises the activities which must be executed by the WfMS that executes this process and which are related to the parameter definition and activity request dispatch. Following the start event we have an OR-Split connector. On the left-hand side of this structure we represent the *execution of the activity* which was requested. This activity must include its correct label when the macro is inserted into the model to better represent the business process being specified. On the right-hand side of the OR-Split we have the *workflow sequence*, indicating that the process does not stop to wait for the completion of the activity which was requested. This pattern was introduced into EPC Tools in an EPML external file, and inherits all the benefits discussed before of flexibility and easiness of implementation.

Figure 10 brings the mapping of the notification pattern. It indicates that the notification activity is executed after the start event is fired.

Figure 10: Notification pattern mapping

Despite the simplicity of this mapping, the business process modeling which includes this structure can be done with less effort by the user as it only needs one click to add this structure in the model. Otherwise, it would need seven mouse clicks and editing of the labels to construct a structure like this from the scratch (only with basic EPC structures).

This pattern is hardcoded into EPC Tools source and, for this reason, cannot be changed by simply modifying an external file.

In a case study related to the implementation of these two patterns, we found a reduction of about one third in the amount of clicks needed to insert the structures in the model. We considered the reduction of design effort (e.g., time as well as errors reduction) as an important aspect which points out to new questions to be investigated as part of a future work.

6 CONCLUSIONS

While workflow patterns were defined for several aspects related to process execution, the aspect of recurrent business functions is only partially addressed by existing work. In prior work, we identified a set of nine workflow patterns that appear necessary and sufficient to model an extensive set of workflows from practice. In this paper we investigated in how far process modeling tools can be tailored to provide a direct support for pattern reuse. Our contribution is a set of requirements the process modeling tool has to address. In order to demonstrate the feasibility we extended the open source process modeling tool EPC Tools with such reuse support. The main advantages of this approach can be summarized as follows: (a) the completeness and necessity of the workflow patterns for the workflow process design had already be evidenced in prior work; (b) the proposed requirements are tool-independent and can be adapted for any business process modeling tool; (c) the requirements were extensively tested in the case of an existent open-source design tool; (d) we provided first evidence that the workflow patterns integrated in a design tool may reduce the design effort.

The main limitation faced with EPC Tools was the lack of some concepts (e.g., block activity, role) that are covered in the original UML version of the workflow patterns. In the future we aim to investigate whether the modeling phase of a workflow project will result in a performance gain through the use of workflow patterns such as the ones proposed in this paper. To do so, it is yet necessary to perform experiments that compare design time with and without a pattern management tool integrated into a workflow design editor (e.g., EPC). In conjunction with the experiment, we consider a questionnaire to find out whether less design effort could result in a higher user acceptance of process modeling in general.

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