Searching for Communication Norms

(Comments on: Goldkuhl / Lind "Questioning Two-Role Models or Who Bakes the Pizza")

Hans Weigand, Aldo de Moor

In the paper *Questioning two-role models or who bakes the pizza* Goldkuhl and Lind provide a critical analysis of the normative framework presented by Weigand & De Moor (WM) at LAP 2001. One of the claims in the latter paper is that organizational actions are doubly embedded (in the sphere of some customer, and in the sphere of some principal), and therefore the two-role model contained in most LAP approaches should be extended. Goldkuhl and Lind (GL) agree with this claim, but notice several shortcomings.

Before discussing the shortcomings that they mention in more detail, we note that in adopting and criticizing the normative framework of WM, they concentrate on the multi-role model and ignore the normative analysis framework that was the basis of this model. WM noticed that current LAP approaches make use of implicit norms about communication, such as "closing the loop". They do not question these norms, but want to make them more explicit, in order to see what is essential in these norms and what not. In this way, it should become possible to assess the quality of a certain process structure, independently from the particular schema technique and way of modelling. It also allows the researcher to see whether the norms are not too strict or too broad. Does a typical workflow chain (not having the form of a loop but of a line) violate the communicative norms, and if so, which ones, and how serious is that? When performing such a norm analysis (analysis of the norms), one cannot ignore the relationship with auditing norms that also make statements about good and bad communication structures and have some resemblance with the LAP norms. The result of this norm analysis was a multi-role model; the purpose of this model was not to model business processes per se, but to be able to model them in such a way that a normative assessment becomes possible.

Let us now consider the most important objections of GL in more detail.

WM do not acknowledge the organization as an actor
In the simple example used in the paper, there was no need to distinguish the pizza baker from the pizzeria organization that he owns. But we fully agree that more can be said about this. First of all, it can be important to distinguish organizational boundaries, and perhaps departmental boundaries within organizations as well. One effect of a boundary is that there is less shared meaning between the actors, and also that problems are harder to handle informally. Apart from that, it might be necessary to see the organization as an actor, and as the top of the vertical delegation structure. Note that also an organization is doubly embedded: it has beneficiaries, and it acts on behalf of a person or group of persons (distinguishing these various external relationships may be much better than the superficial term "stakeholder" that is often used nowadays).

WM do not acknowledge internal workflow loops
In the example, there were no internal workflow loops. But as the article said, this is not a principled choice. Workflow loops can be internal and external.

WM do not distinguish between principal-agency relationships and recurrent workflow loops

This point needs some discussion. A principal-agency relationship consists basically of two roles, the principal and the agent. For example, the baker and only the delivery boy who delivers pizzas on behalf of the baker, and for the benefit of the customer. The delivery is preceded by an instructional conversation and followed by an evaluative conversation. Just as with the customer relationship, we should keep in mind that the control loop as such (the exchange of messages) is not the whole relationship. The exchange of messages embedded in a context (Weigand et al, 1999) that provides the shared background knowledge, including knowledge about how each party performs its role. In the case of customer relationships, this context can be identified with the contract relation (as long as the notion of "contract" is not taken too narrowly/literally). But a similar context should also be recognized in the case of the control loop and the principal-agent relationship.

In the extended workflow loop model, the principal has delegated a certain task to an agent, but he keeps a "contract relation" with the beneficiary. A similar kind of delegation may happen (and it often does) with the control loop: the principal delegates part of the control, in particular the operational message exchange, to other agents, but keeps the principal-agency relationship itself. Contained in this relationship is the role description and role assignment mentioned by GL. In other words, the WM model does distinguish between the principal-agency relationship itself and the recurrent workflow loop, but it must be admitted that the paper was not very explicit about this. The complex example with boy and daughter can be used as an illustration. The instruction to the boy to deliver the pizza (what GL call a forwarded order) is something that evidently the baker delegated to the daughter. But of course, this conversation is heavily dependent on the role assignment from the baker to the boy that was done earlier (and only once); the daughter does not need to explain what the boy should do, the pizza and the address suffice.

Many critical issues raised by GL have to do with this point. For example, they find it strange that "it is possible to introduce a delegation link without a full control loop" (point 9). The answer is given above: a delegation link always includes a full control loop, but the control loop can be delegated itself, and then the two get separated (point 7). We agree that this delegation can lead to complicated pictures (point 6). But the way of modelling was not WM's primary concern. The main concern is: what are the norms governing workflow loops and control loops, and do they allow for delegation? If they do not allow for delegation, the structures can remain simple, but standing rather far away from organizational reality. If they do allow for delegation, then the norm cannot be that the evaluator and initiator must be the same, but should be formulated less strictly (without giving up the norm itself). This is what WM have tried to make clear.

For these reasons, we do not think that the proposal of GL to introduce new concepts such as internal product assignment and next recipient is a good solution. These concepts may be useful on a descriptive level. But it is not clear where these concepts come from – whereas the WM model can derive everything from the double-embedded agent concept. The GL model is static, the WM model is dynamic (generative). An important criterion is the question of the norms. If the new concepts

help in arriving at a better or simpler formulation of the norms, this would be definitely interesting. However, GL do not discuss the norms.

WM assume that there must exist an evaluation task (by the initiator) for each communication loop

The model of WM assumes indeed that both in the (customer) workflow loop and in a control loop there must be an evaluation task. This is one norm. Another norm is that the evaluator must be the same as the initiator (in the case of the control loop, this is the principal). GL "question (in the case of internal workflow loops) the need for evaluation". We do think that this norm is a valid one and violating this norm *can* lead to ambiguous situations as far as responsibility is concerned and, in the long turn, to loss of quality. However, GL are right in drawing attention to this point since:

?? after some delegations, the initiator and evaluator will often not be the same subject anymore. So the second norm should be rephrased to something like: the principal should be *responsible* for initiating and evaluating the control loop (where "responsible" means that either he does it himself or he has delegated it)

?? as we discussed above, a distinction should be made between the principal-agency relationship itself and the control loop embedded in it. This means that evaluation is also more complicated than LAP usually acknowledges. Probably, a distinction must be made between evaluation as part of the control loop sec (that is, the marking within the operational flow that some task has been finished), and the evaluation as part of the agency relationship (concerned with the question whether the agent has used the resources of the principal according to the rules and in an optimal way). We believe that both are necessary, but they should not be mixed. In that sense, we agree with GL that quality control is not needed for each workflow initiation (point 10).

The model of WM has enabled a discussion about communication norms. In our opinion, this is a very important issue for LAP. If the LAP community does not succeed in making clear what communication norms it adheres to, the advantage of LAP models over "norm-free" models such as Data Flow Diagrams can be questioned. But uncovering these norms is not easy. They should neither overspecify nor underspecify the communicatively sound practices.

The pizza is not ready yet.

References
Goldkuhl, G., M. Lind (2002) Questioning two-role models or who bakes the pizza? *Proc. LAP 2002*.
Weigand, H., A. de Moor (2001), A framework for the normative analysis of workflow loops. *Proc. LAP 2001*.
Weigand, H. S. Hoppenbrouwers, A. de Moor (1999) The Context of Conversations - Texts and Communities. *Proc. LAP'99*.