

Implementing Business Process Management in a Cantonal Administration - A Practical Case from the Canton of St. Gallen^{*}

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Abstract

This paper presents a practical case of how Business Process Management (BPM) was introduced in the Canton of St. Gallen as a strategic capability for improving process orientation, interdepartmental coordination, and administrative coherence. Rather than treating BPM as a documentation exercise, the canton positioned it as an organizational capability that supports learning, governance, and continuous improvement. The case shows how a central BPM lead, decentralized departmental contacts, a shared process repository, a maturity model, and a community of practice were combined to embed BPM across a public administration. Using an explanatory case study design, the paper reconstructs the implementation logic and discusses how BPM can foster organizational learning in public-sector settings. The case contributes practical lessons for public administrations seeking to align process management, digitalization, and organizational development.

Keywords

Business Process Management, public administration, organizational learning, New Public Management, process culture, maturity model, governance

1 Introduction

Public administrations are increasingly required to deliver services efficiently, transparently, and in compliance with legal requirements, while also adapting to digital transformation and changing societal expectations [1, 4]. In this environment, process orientation has become a central capability for ensuring consistent service delivery. Business Process Management (BPM) offers a structured approach for identifying, documenting, governing, and continuously improving business processes across organizational boundaries [3].

In public-sector settings, however, BPM implementation is often challenging because responsibilities are distributed across units, legal frameworks are stringent, and process ownership must be aligned with hierarchical as well as functional structures [4].

The Canton of St. Gallen initiated BPM as a strategic and organizational development measure to address these challenges. The goal was not merely to create process documentation, but to establish a sustainable process culture supported by clear roles, standards, and coordination mechanisms. This paper presents the chosen implementation approach and discusses how BPM was anchored in the cantonal administration through leadership commitment, process modeling, maturity assessment, and structured knowledge exchange. The case is intended as a practical contribution for other public-sector organizations pursuing similar ambitions.

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2 Problem Statement

The cantonal administration operates in a setting characterized by legal obligations, political accountability, decentralized responsibility, and a high need for interdepartmental coordination. In such an environment, process fragmentation, inconsistent documentation practices, and ambiguous responsibilities can easily emerge. At the same time, public organizations are expected to provide reliable services, ensure traceability of administrative actions, and continuously improve internal and external process performance.

In the Canton of St. Gallen, BPM was introduced with the explicit aim of improving customer-oriented service delivery, transparency, legal compliance, productivity, and support for electronic case processing. The reform context was aligned with New Public Management and raised three linked questions:

1. How should the IT landscape be designed to support digital processes?
2. What capabilities are needed in departments and agencies to achieve strategic goals?
3. How should business processes be designed to meet those requirements?

The core problem addressed by the case is therefore not only process inefficiency, but the broader challenge of building a coherent process capability in a decentralized public administration. BPM was chosen as a response because it could connect governance, process transparency, and capability development across departments.

3 Research Background

BPM is best understood as an organizational capability rather than a narrow modeling technique. BPM literature frames it as a holistic management approach that enables organizations to analyze, design, implement, govern, and continuously improve processes in strategic alignment [6].

This view is commonly captured in six core BPM dimensions: strategic alignment, governance, methods, information technology, people, and culture [5]. These elements demonstrate that BPM extends beyond process documentation to a coordinated managerial, technological, and human capital supporting repeatable process change.

For the present case, BPM is conceptualized as a multidimensional capability that connects operational work to long-term learning, improvement, and value creation [8]. This perspective is particularly useful in public administration because it shifts attention from isolated modeling tasks to organizational embedding and sustainability.

The paper also draws on organizational learning research. Organizational learning refers to how organizations acquire, interpret, share, and institutionalize knowledge in ways that shape future action and enhance capability [7]. The study uses Crossan, Lane, and White's 4I framework [2] because it captures the movement from individual insights to collective and institutionalized practice through intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing. It is well suited to BPM research because it shows how localized process experiences can become shared understanding, coordinated action, and formal routines.

This paper adopts the view that BPM can actively produce organizational learning. In the St. Gallen case, BPM was not limited to documentation or standardization, but organized through roles, governance arrangements, training formats, a shared repository, and cross-departmental exchange structures. BPM is therefore analyzed here as an organizational learning infrastructure that makes process knowledge explicit, coordinates interpretation across units, and embeds learning in formal structures and routines.

4 Method and Case Material

The paper is based on an explanatory industry case study design and reconstructs the BPM implementation in the Canton of St. Gallen. This approach is appropriate for capturing the longitudinal development of BPM, the interaction between process structures and learning practices, and the institutionalization of governance and routines.

The case was jointly developed by the BPM-responsible actors and OST as an academic partner, combining internal process knowledge with an external analytical perspective. The empirical basis covers the launch of the BPM initiative in 2020, the role of the BPM lead, the creation of a central competence structure with decentralized departmental contacts, the consolidation of Signavio² tenants, the use of modeling standards, reporting to top management, and the introduction of training and exchange formats.

The analysis is guided by organizational learning mechanisms, with particular attention to making knowledge explicit, creating shared interpretation, integrating knowledge across units, and institutionalizing knowledge in structures and routines. The methodological goal is not statistical generalization, but a transferable implementation logic for public administration.

5 BPM Implementation

The BPM initiative in the Canton of St. Gallen began in 2020 with a strategic decision to establish BPM as a formal organizational capability. Instead of adopting a purely militia-like support model, the canton chose a central BPM lead supported by decentralized departmental contacts. This configuration combines centralized coordination with local anchoring and gives BPM a visible institutional home within the administration.

5.1 Institutionalizing learning

The formal start of the initiative was the creation of the BPM lead role. This role was introduced to ensure continuity, visibility, and responsibility for BPM across the organization. The underlying design choice was deliberate: BPM should not be handled only on request or as an occasional support service but should be anchored as a recognized organizational responsibility. This decision created the basis for building shared process awareness and for integrating BPM into administrative governance.

5.2 Central coordination and decentralized ownership

The BPM lead and the Competence Center BPM defined the operational framework of the initiative. This included the use of Signavio as the modeling platform, eCH³ as the modeling standard, BPM training, and methodological support for offices and departments. At the same time, departmental process managers contributed part of their working time to BPM, with the scope of involvement adjusted to local requirements. This setup established common standards and ensured methodological consistency while keeping BPM connected to departmental realities.

² SAP Signavio® is the BPM-platform used by the canton of St. Gallen

³The eCH standard refers to a set of guidelines and specifications developed by the eCH Association to harmonize and digitize e-government in Switzerland.

5.3 Process transparency through Signavio

A central implementation step was the consolidation of nine Signavio tenants into three tenants⁴. This created a shared repository for process models and established a common source of truth across the organization. The consolidation also enabled unified modeling standards and quality assurance through trained and authorized modelers. As a result, process knowledge became more transparent, comparable, and reusable across units, and fragmentation in the modeling landscape was reduced.

5.4 Buy-in through visible improvements

Acceptance of BPM was strengthened by visible improvements, especially through the centralization of HR processes. These measures relieved departments and offices in their daily work and demonstrated the practical value of process standardization. BPM thus became tangible not only as a documentation effort but as a means of improving service delivery and coordination. This practical evidence was important for building credibility and encouraging broader organizational support.

5.5 Maturity model and self-assessment

The BPM maturity model enabled offices and departments to assess their maturity level for process management across several dimensions, including process description, roles, ownership, communication routines, continuous improvement, KPI usage, and digitalization readiness. Its purpose was to shift attention from merely documenting processes to actively living process management as an organizational practice. The model supported self-reflection and allowed units to identify development needs, compare maturity levels, and define next steps.

5.6 BPM handbook and governance

The BPM Organizational Handbook defined the principles, responsibilities, procedures, and operational elements of BPM. It clarified the distinction between line responsibility and support responsibility: line units remain accountable for process ownership, while the BPM competence structure provides methods, coordination, and infrastructure. This governance arrangement formalized BPM experience and embedded it in repeatable routines.

5.7 Community of Practice

The canton-wide BPM Community of Practice (CoP) provided a forum for exchange between peers, discussion of challenges, and identification of recurring issues. It also contributed to the development of a shared BPM identity across departments. By linking experiences from different organizational units, the format turned local practice into shared knowledge and strengthened horizontal learning. It also supported the emergence of a common process-oriented language.

5.8 Leadership development and OST partnership

Leadership training in cooperation with OST framed BPM as a leadership and organizational capability topic rather than a documentation exercise. The partnership added an academic perspective and linked practical implementation with conceptual reflection. It encouraged

⁴ Two more tenants than strictly necessary, since tax administration and cantonal police have sensitive data and do not wish to make it available to everyone.

managers to question not only process execution, but also underlying responsibilities, services, and digitalization priorities. In this sense, the training supported deeper reflection on organizational design and opened the door to double-loop learning.

5.9 Challenges and how they were overcome

The implementation of BPM was shaped by a set of interrelated challenges and corresponding solution approaches, which together contributed to a pragmatic and effective rollout.

A central challenge concerned limited resources, as process modeling and optimization activities were typically carried out alongside daily operational responsibilities. This constraint raised fundamental questions regarding the appropriate scope of BPM, particularly in avoiding over-documentation while ensuring sufficient process transparency. This issue was addressed through a deliberately pragmatic approach: the use of a BPMN tool with a restricted notation set based on the eCH standard, combined with simple collaboration functionalities, enabled efficient and accessible process modeling. By focusing primarily on high-impact core processes, the initiative achieved rapid results and broad adoption across organizational units. In addition, a lean BPM governance model with a flat role hierarchy and functional quality gates, implemented through process managers, helped maintain consistency without creating excessive overhead. Nevertheless, sustaining BPM-related competencies remained challenging, particularly for staff only sporadically involved in process work; this was partially mitigated through embedded roles and practical application in projects.

Leadership engagement emerged as another critical success factor. BPM adoption depended heavily on the willingness of managerial staff to take ownership of process-related activities. Initially, this represented a barrier, as BPM was not uniformly perceived as a leadership responsibility. The initiative addressed this by explicitly positioning BPM as a management task and by demonstrating its practical value, for example as a foundation for KPI-based decision-making and performance improvement. Tangible successes, such as its contribution to IT-project preparation and execution, helped to strengthen leadership commitment over time.

The question of how extensively to formalize a BPM strategy also posed challenges. Instead of pursuing a comprehensive, top-down framework, the canton adopted a pragmatic and purpose-driven approach. The emphasis was placed on the “why” of BPM, ensuring that process work generates tangible value rather than being perceived as a compliance-driven exercise. This orientation was reinforced by concrete use cases, including the support of IT-projects and the introduction of robotic process automation (RPA), where process analysis and optimization were integrated into project initiation and approval procedures. Furthermore, BPM provided a valuable foundation for related cross-functional domains such as internal control systems (ICS) and business continuity management (BCM), which are currently under development.

Another obstacle involved transferring BPM knowledge from private sector practices and academic theory into the public administration context. Administrative environments are characterized by specific constraints, including clearly defined responsibilities, regulatory requirements, and limited cross-organizational control. To address this, BPM methods were adapted to fit these contextual conditions, emphasizing clarity, compliance, and practical applicability. The use of standardized yet simplified modeling conventions further facilitated acceptance among stakeholders.

In addition, BPM was at times perceived as a one-off project rather than a continuous improvement discipline. This led to situations where processes were documented but not actively maintained or utilized. To counter this perception, BPM was systematically embedded into the agenda of management meetings. This helped shift the understanding of BPM towards a continuous and iterative management approach.

Finally, institutional boundaries and siloed structures posed significant challenges for end-to-end process management. Sensitive interfaces between organizational units raised questions regarding access rights, responsibilities, and transparency. These challenges were addressed through a combination of governance mechanisms, including clearly defined roles and quality gates, as well as the promotion of cross-functional collaboration. While structural constraints remain, BPM contributed to increasing transparency and fostering a more process-oriented perspective across departmental boundaries.

Overall, the experience demonstrates that a pragmatic, value-oriented BPM approach—supported by lightweight standards, appropriate governance structures, and strong integration into operational and project contexts—can effectively address typical implementation barriers in public administration while generating tangible benefits.

6 Findings: How BPM fostered organizational learning

The case demonstrates that BPM operated as an organizational-learning infrastructure rather than merely as a documentation or optimization tool. By rendering process knowledge visible, comparable, discussable, and governable across hierarchical and departmental boundaries, BPM supported both **exploitation** and **exploration** [6]. Exploitation refers to codification, standardization, and scaling of proven routines, while exploration refers to reflection, redesign, and capability development.

6.1 Making tacit knowledge explicit

A core success factor was making tacit process knowledge visible and actionable. By using Signavio, employees and trained modelers translated experience-based administrative know-how into standardized process models, establishing a single source of truth. These models became practical tools for alignment, decision-making, and continuous improvement.

The digital eSpesen process demonstrates the impact: employees submit expenses via mobile or desktop, and reimbursements are triggered automatically upon approval. This end-to-end workflow removed media breaks, reduced processing time, and increased transparency—effectively scaling and standardizing a previously fragmented routine.

Supported by trained modelers and the eCH standard, the initiative ensured consistency across departments and enabled reuse of process knowledge. Overall, the approach strengthened cross-unit coordination, improved efficiency, and created a foundation for ongoing process innovation.

6.2 Creating a shared language

On this explicit knowledge base, BPM also established a common language for process work. The consolidation from nine tenants into three Signavio tenants, the use of the eCH standard, and the presence of a central BPM lead with decentralized departmental contacts created a governance structure combining organizational consistency with local ownership. This reduced fragmentation and enabled units with distinct professional logics to discuss processes through shared terminology and reference points.

This shared language is analytically significant because organizational learning depends not only on information transfer, but also on interpretation and integration across groups. BPM facilitated this process by enabling actors to make sense of process changes and align local practices with an organization-wide perspective. The central repository and common standard thus functioned as an interface between decentralized expertise and collective coordination.

6.3 Enabling structured self-reflection

The BPM maturity model enabled structured self-assessment and made process capabilities comparable across departments. Table 1 illustrates a shared five-level framework through which units identified gaps, prioritized improvements, and aligned on common quality standards.

It supported single- and double-loop learning: departments improved existing processes, clarified responsibilities, and closed known gaps (**exploitation**, single-loop learning), while also questioning underlying assumptions and redesigning process governance (**exploration**, double-loop learning).

As a result, self-reflection became a systematic and actionable practice, strengthening transparency, consistency, and continuous development across the organization.

Table 1. BPM maturity model of the Canton of St. Gallen

Level-#	Level-title	Score range	Core focus
1	Building Process Thinking	0-20	First process management activities exist.
2	Process Identification	21-40	Relevant processes are known and documented.
3	Embedding BPM	41-60	BPM roles, responsibilities, and governance are established.
4	Defined Goals and KPIs	61-80	Processes are measured, reviewed, and continuously improved.
5	Digital Optimization Approaches	81-100	Processes are digitally supported, automated, and continuously optimized.

6.4 Institutionalizing learning

BPM learning was anchored in governance rather than relying on individual champions. Formal roles, structures, and routines—such as process ownership, BPM contacts, management reporting, and a centrally funded Signavio platform—ensured continuity and scalability.

This institutionalization created organizational memory, enabling proven practices to be standardized and reused across departments, while coordinated governance also allowed the controlled introduction and testing of new process designs.

The impact is visible in daily operations: solutions such as the digital eSpesen process and transparent HR workflows show how insights were translated into stable, organization-wide routines. BPM thus ensured not only learning, but its sustained application through formalized processes.

6.5 Supporting horizontal exchange

A canton-wide Community of Practice (CoP) enabled horizontal exchange across departments and external organizations, allowing practitioners to share challenges, compare solutions, and refine standards and tools. This created a social infrastructure that complemented formal BPM and connected diverse administrative contexts.

The CoP supported both exploration and exploitation: it exposed participants to new approaches and expanded their solution space (**exploration**), while also stabilizing and spreading effective practices across units (**exploitation**).

By linking operational experience with collective learning, the CoP strengthened cross-unit alignment and fed practical insights back into BPM standards and governance.

6.6 Connecting operations and strategy

At the strategic level, BPM was linked to leadership development and governance. Leadership training at OST and reporting to top management positioned BPM not only as a process discipline, but also as a leadership and organizational capability topic associated with performance, digitalization, and organizational development. This broadened BPM beyond operational efficiency and made it relevant for strategic decision-making.

Conceptually, this reflects double-loop learning and dynamic capability building: the organization did not only improve individual processes, but also increased its ability to reconfigure processes, roles, and governance arrangements in response to changing requirements. Strategic embedding ensured that process management remained connected to broader institutional priorities rather than becoming a purely technical exercise.

6.7 Key levers for implementation

Across these mechanisms, the case suggests that successful BPM-driven organizational learning depended on three key levers.

First, a multi-level network across the organization was essential: the Conference of Secretaries-General acted as a top-management board, the BPM expert team supported cooperation across departments, the CoP connected process practitioners, and the integration of apprentice education ensured that BPM learning began early during organizational entry. This configuration supported **exploitation** through alignment and consistency, while also creating room for **exploration** through exchange and experimentation.

Second, BPM was strengthened by links to governance topics such as Internal Control System (ICS) and Business Continuity Management (BCM), which made process management relevant for risk, resilience, and compliance. This primarily reinforced exploitation, as BPM contributed to the stabilization of reliable routines and organizational control.

Third, internal and external alliances were important, especially the cooperation with OST as an academic partner, which reinforced conceptual development, training, and legitimacy. This external connection particularly supported exploration, as it introduced new ideas, conceptual frameworks, and reflective distance beyond internal routine optimization.

7 Significance and Relevance

This case reframes BPM as a driver of organizational learning rather than a prerequisite. In the St. Gallen case, BPM practices—such as process modeling, repositories, maturity assessments, governance, and communities of practice—enabled transparency, shared understanding, and cross-unit coordination, turning distributed knowledge into a managed organizational capability.

For practitioners, the key insight is that BPM creates value when implemented as an integrated management approach, not as a standalone documentation exercise. Impact emerged from combining clear mandate, central coordination, decentralized ownership, common standards, and visible early results. Together, these elements enabled both exploitation (standardizing and scaling proven practices) and exploration (adapting and redesigning processes across units).

The case is particularly relevant for public administrations, where legal accountability, fragmented responsibilities, and the need for coordination coexist. BPM helps balance these tensions by establishing shared structures while preserving local ownership, supporting sustainable process improvement in complex organizational settings.

8 Scope and Limitations

This case is based on a single public-sector organization and focuses on the early institutionalization of BPM. It provides practice-oriented insights into how BPM can enable organizational learning, rather than generalizable evidence on performance outcomes.

While the case highlights BPM's potential as a learning infrastructure, its long-term impact on process performance and service quality remains to be validated. The findings reflect a collaborative and interpretive approach, combining practical experience with academic analysis.

Future research should examine how BPM-driven learning evolves over time and under which conditions it leads to measurable improvements in performance, compliance, and digital transformation.

9 Conclusions

The Canton of St. Gallen case shows that BPM in public administration can function as more than a process improvement method. When supported by clear governance, a shared repository, maturity assessment, and peer exchange, BPM becomes an organizational learning infrastructure that strengthens transparency, coordination, and institutionalized continuous improvement.

The central lesson is that BPM should be embedded as a managerial and organizational capability, not treated as a technical documentation task. In the St. Gallen case, the combination of central coordination, decentralized ownership, visible early benefits, and structured learning formats created the conditions for sustainable BPM. This makes the case relevant not only for BPM scholarship, but also for public administrations seeking to align process improvement with organizational development.

Access to the supporting material of the case study can be granted by the authors upon request.

Declaration on Generative AI

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Perplexity in order to: Improve writing style. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the publication's content.

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