

Manfred Reichert, Barbara Weber

Enabling Flexibility in Process-Aware Information Systems

Challenges, Methods, Technologies

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Chapter 3

Flexibility Issues in Process-Aware Information Systems

Abstract Traditionally, process-aware information systems (PAISs) have focused on the support of predictable and repetitive business processes. Even though respective processes are suited to be fully pre-specified in a process model, flexibility is required to support dynamic process adaptations in case of exceptions. Flexibility is also needed to accommodate the need for evolving business processes and to cope with business process variability. Furthermore, PAISs are increasingly used to support less structured processes which can often be characterized as knowledge-intensive. Processes of this category are neither fully predictable nor repetitive, and therefore cannot be fully pre-specified at build-time. The (partial) unpredictability of these processes also demands a certain amount of looseness. This chapter deals with the flexibility needs of both pre-specified and loosely-specified processes and elicits requirements for flexible process support in a PAIS. In addition, the chapter discusses PAIS features needed to accommodate flexibility needs in practice like, for example, traceability, business compliance and user support.

3.1 Motivation

Traditionally, PAISs have focused on the support of predictable and repetitive business processes, which can be fully described prior to their execution in terms of formal process models [179]. Typical examples falling in this category include business processes in banking and insurance companies; e.g., opening a new bank account or granting a loan. Even though repetitive business processes are usually predictable, a certain degree of flexibility is needed to support dynamic process adaptations in case of exceptions; e.g., death of a policyholder or a marital divorce requiring a change of insurance and/or beneficiaries [337]. Moreover, flexibility is required to accommodate the need for evolving business processes. As example consider process changes due to altered legal requirements. Finally, support for business process variability is needed. For example, different process variants may exist depending on the type of insurances.

PAISs are increasingly used to support less structured business processes as well. The latter are often characterized as *knowledge-intensive*. Processes of this category feature *non-repeatability*, i.e., the models of two process instances do not fully resemble one another. Generally, knowledge-intensive processes tend to be *unpredictable* since the exact course of action depends on situation-specific parameters [337]. The values of these parameters are usually not known *a priori* and may change during process execution. Moreover, knowledge-intensive processes can be characterized as *emergent*, i.e., knowledge gathered during the execution of the process determines its future course of action [141]. Consequently, respective processes cannot be prescribed at a fine-grained level at build-time. In addition to variability, adaptation and evolution that is required for predictable processes, they require looseness. Typical examples of the latter process category include innovation processes (e.g., introducing a new product or service) and call center processes (e.g., handling of a computer problem by the helpdesk).

The vast majority of business processes, however, can be characterized by a combination of predictable and unpredictable elements falling in between these two extremes. Healthcare processes, for example, reflect the combination of predictable and unpredictable elements quite well. While procedures for handling single medical orders or examinations are relatively predictable, complex patient treatment processes are rather unpredictable and unfold during process execution [173]. Similar considerations hold for law enforcement processes (i.e., investigation of a crime) [337]. A criminal investigation constitutes an example of a knowledge-intensive process that can be characterized by non-repeatability, unpredictability, and emergence. However, this process has predictable elements as well; e.g., lab analysis or witness deposition.

Providing appropriate support for this wide range of business processes poses several challenges, which will be detailed in this chapter. In Section 3.2 we elaborate in detail on the different flexibility needs. Once these are identified, Section 3.3 elicits fundamental requirements for flexible business process support by a PAIS. Finally, Section 3.4 discusses the organization of the remaining book chapters along the identified flexibility needs.

3.2 A Taxonomy of Flexibility Needs in Process-aware Information Systems

Flexible process support by a PAIS can be characterized by four major flexibility needs, namely support for variability, looseness, adaptation, and evolution (cf. Fig. 3.1). Each of these flexibility needs may affect each of the process perspectives (i.e., behavior, organization, information, operation, function, and time) introduced in Chapter 2. In the subsequent sections of this chapter we present a brief summary of each flexibility need and present real-world processes to illustrate it. A detailed discussion of concepts and methods satisfying these needs follows in the remaining book chapters.

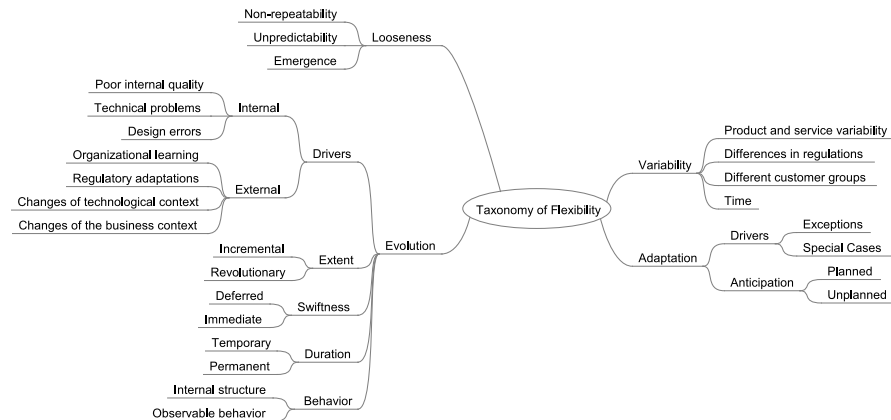


Fig. 3.1 A Taxonomy of Process Flexibility Needs

3.2.1 Variability

Process variability can be found in many domains and requires processes to be handled differently—resulting in different *process variants*—depending on the given context [107, 125, 130]. Process variants typically share the same core process whereas the concrete course of action fluctuates from variant to variant. *Product and service variability*, for example, often require support for different process variants depending on the concrete product variant [227]. Moreover, process variants might exist due to *differences in regulations* found in different countries and regions [129]. Variability might be also introduced due to different *groups of customers* (e.g., priority care for premium customers) or due to *temporal differences* (e.g., seasonal changes). The parameters causing process variability are mostly known *a priori* (e.g., country-specific regulations). Even though the concrete variant can often only be determined during process execution, the course of action for a particular context is well understood.

Example 3.1 (Vehicle Repair). The process for handling vehicle repair in a garage constitutes a good example of a process showing high variability. Depending on the process context, different variants of this process are required. While some parts of the process are shared by all variants, variability is introduced due to country-specific, garage-specific, and vehicle-specific differences. Overall, hundreds of variants may exist in such a context [129].

3.2.2 Looseness

As discussed, knowledge-intensive processes can be characterized as *non-repeatable* (i.e., every process instance looks slightly different), *unpredictable* (i.e., the exact course of action is unknown and is highly situation-specific), and *emergent* (i.e., the exact course of action only emerges during process execution when more information becomes available). For processes of this category only their goal is known *a priori* (e.g., treating the rupture of a patient's cruciate ligament or the judicial process in seeking a criminal conviction). In turn, the parameters determining the exact course of action are typically not known *a priori* and might change during process execution. As a consequence, these processes cannot be fully pre-specified. In addition, it is not possible to establish a set of process variants for these processes, since the parameters causing differences between process instances are not known *a priori* (unlike with variability). Instead, processes of this category require a loose specification.

Example 3.2 (Patient Treatment Processes). Patient treatment processes in a hospital typically comprise activities related to patient intake, admission, diagnosis, treatment, and discharge [173]. Typically, such processes comprise dozens up to hundreds of activities and are long-running (i.e., from a few days to several months). Furthermore, the treatments of two different patients are *rarely identical*; instead the course of action greatly depends on the specific situation; e.g., health status of the patient, allergies and chemical intolerances, decisions made by the physician, examination results, and clinical indications. This situation can change during the treatment process, i.e., the course of action is *unpredictable*. Moreover, treatment processes typically unfold during their execution, i.e., examination results yield information determining how to continue with the treatment. The overall treatment process thereby emerges through the arrangement of simple, well structured processes (e.g., handling medical orders) often resulting in complex process structures.

3.2.3 Adaptation

Adaptation represents the ability of a PAIS to adapt the process and its structure (i.e., pre-specified model) to emerging events. Respective events often lead to situations in which the PAIS does not adequately reflect the real-world process anymore. As a consequence, one or several process instances have to be adapted in order to realign the computerized processes with the real-world ones.

Drivers for Adaptation. Process adaptations are triggered by different drivers. Respective adaptations might be required to cope with *special situations* during process execution, which have not been foreseen in the process model [335], e.g., because they only occur very rarely. Moreover, *exceptions* occurring in the real-world (e.g., an allergic reaction of a patient) or processing errors (e.g., a failed activity) often require deviations from the standard process. A detailed discussion of sources for exceptions will follow in Chapter 6.

Anticipation of Adaptation. Usually, many exceptions can be anticipated and therefore be *planned* upfront by capturing them in the process model. Generally, a deviation can only be planned if both the context of its occurrence and measures to handle it are known. However, it is hardly possible to foresee all exceptions that may occur in the context of a particular process. Therefore, support for dealing with *unplanned* exceptions is additionally needed.

Example 3.3 (Examination Procedures in a Hospital). A simple examination procedure in a hospital comprises activities like *Enter Order*, *Schedule Examination*, *Inform Patient*, *Transfer Patient*, *Perform Medical Examination*, *Medical Report*, and *Validate Report* (cf. Example 2.2 in Chapter 2). Even for such a simple process, exceptional situations might occur, that require deviations from the pre-specified process. For example, in case of an emergency there is no time to follow the usual procedure. Instead the patient is immediately examined without making any appointment or preparing the examination facility. To cope with such situation, it should be possible to skip one or more activities. In exceptional situations it can further be required to perform additional (i.e., unplanned) activities for a particular patient (e.g., to carry out an additional preparation step for the examination). Besides changes in appointments, cancellations, failures in the execution of activities (e.g., omitted preparations, loss of a sample, or incorrect collection of diagnostic material) might also lead to deviations from the standard procedure (e.g., by redoing activities). If an appointment is cancelled, for example, the patient treatment process (including the previously made appointment) will have to be aborted.

In the medical domain such deviations from the standard procedure are the norm and have to be flexibly addressed by physicians and nursing staff.

3.2.4 Evolution

Evolution represents the ability of the process implemented in a PAIS to change when the corresponding business process evolves [62, 291]. Since business processes can evolve over time, it is not sufficient to implement them once and then to never touch the PAIS again. In order to ensure that real-world processes and the PAIS remain aligned, these changes have to be propagated to the PAIS as well. Typically, such evolutionary changes are planned changes at the process type level, which are conducted to accommodate evolving needs.

Drivers for Business Process Evolution. Process evolution is often driven by changes in the business, the technological environment, and the legal context [14]. Another driver is organizational learning. All these drivers are *external* to the PAIS (cf. Fig. 3.2). Evolution of real-world processes can be triggered by a changing *business context* like an evolving market (e.g., emergence of new competitors) or changing customer behavior. Changes in the *technological context* might have far reaching effects on the business processes of an organization. For example, the increasing popularity of mobile devices is revolutionizing the way how people are interacting with each other. Changes might further be triggered by *regulatory adaptations* like, for example, the introduction of Sarbanes-Oxley [339] or Basel II [43]. Finally, changes of business processes might be a result of *organizational learning* and be triggered by emerging optimization opportunities or misalignments between real-world processes and the ones supported by PAISs.

In addition to external triggers, changes of processes implemented in a PAIS might also become necessary due to developments inside the PAIS, i.e., there exist *internal* drivers for changes as well [14]. For example, *design errors* might cause problems during the execution of process instances in the PAIS (e.g., deadlocks or missing data). Moreover, *technical problems* like performance degradation (e.g., due to an increasing amount of data) may require changes in the PAIS. Finally, *poor internal quality* of process models (e.g., non intention revealing naming of activities or redundant process model fragments) may require changes [352].

Extent of Evolution. Process evolution may be *incremental* (i.e., only requiring small changes of the implemented process) as for continuous process improvements [138, 239, 242], or be *revolutionary* (i.e., requiring radical changes) as in the context of process innovation or process re-engineering [131].

Swiftness of Evolution. Depending on the kind of evolutionary change, different requirements regarding the treatment of ongoing process instances exist [255]. In some scenarios, it is sufficient to apply the changes only to those process instances which will be newly created and to complete the ongoing ones according to the old version of the business process. This, in turn, would require *deferred evolution* and co-existence of different versions of a process model within the PAIS. In many practical scenarios, however, evolutionary changes have an effect on ongoing process instances as well. For example, regulatory changes often have a retroactive

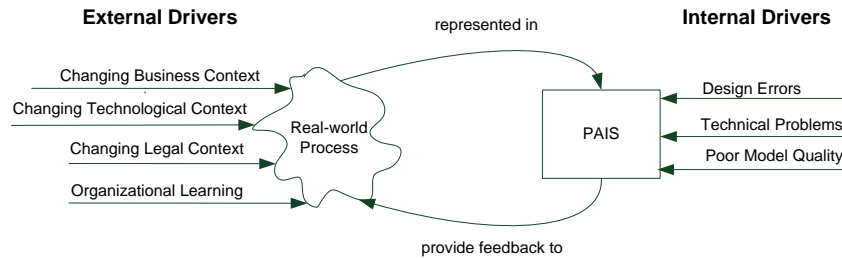


Fig. 3.2 Real-world Versus Computerized Processes

impact and require ongoing process instances (if they have not progressed too far) to be adapted. Such *immediate evolution* is mostly relevant for long-running processes instances, i.e., process instances with a duration up to several weeks or months.

Duration of Evolution. Evolutionary changes can be *permanent* or *temporary*. While *permanent changes* are valid from the time they are introduced (unless they are compensated by later permanent changes), *temporary changes* are only valid for a certain period of time, e.g., during a special promotion period.

Visibility of Evolution. Evolutionary changes may either be changes of the *observable process behavior* or the *internal structure* of the PAIS. While changes of the *observable behavior* are always reflected by the PAIS support of the real-world processes, changes of the *internal structure* are kept inside the PAIS (e.g., to address poor internal model quality) [352]. Adding or deleting activities from a process model are examples of changes concerning the observable behavior. A typical change only affecting the internal structure of the PAIS includes the removal of process model redundancies by extracting common parts to sub-process models.

Example 3.4 (Tender Preparation). A typical process for tender preparation comprises activities like *Enter Customer Request*, *Check Feasibility*, *Create Offer*, and *Submit Tender*. For *standard customers* the offer is usually created based on the latest price list, while for *gold customers* a special offer is prepared which has to be authorized by the department head. Since the creation of special offers (including checks of the special terms of the offer) turned out to be more expensive than estimated benefits (e.g., through increased customer loyalty), the management decided to evolve the process such that no special offers would be made in future.

In this example the evolution is triggered through organizational learning and economic concerns. The change is incremental and affects the external

behavior of the process in a permanent manner. Moreover, the change is deferred; i.e., it only affects newly created offers (i.e., future process instances).

Example 3.5 (Introduction of New Medical Devices). The introduction of new medical imaging devices in a hospital sometimes has implications on the corresponding examination process. Assume that due to the high acquisition cost for the new device the hospital decides to use it for examining outpatients as well (in addition to inpatient examinations). This, in turn, implies changes in the registration procedure. These changes not only affect new patients, but also ongoing examination processes.

In this example the evolution is triggered through economic concerns. As in Example 3.4 the change is incremental and affects the external behavior of the process in a permanent manner. Moreover, the change is immediate; i.e., it also affects ongoing examination processes.

Example 3.6 (Inconsistent Naming of Process Models). Large process model repositories that have evolved over many years often have significant inconsistencies regarding activity labels and labeling styles. For example, the repository described in [324] contained 16 process models all having activities dealing with the scheduling of medical procedures (e.g., surgeries, medical examinations and drug administrations). Though all these activities had similar intentions, different labels and labeling styles were used (e.g., “Make Appointment”, “Appointment”, “Schedule Examination”, “Fix Day”, “Agree on Surgery Date”, and “Plan”). This, in turn, required a huge effort when reusing the models later in the context of a large process model harmonization. In particular, activity labels had to be consolidated by refactoring respective process models [352].

3.3 Requirements for a Flexible PAIS

From the previously described flexibility needs (i.e., variability, looseness, adaptation, and evolution), technical requirements can be derived which have to be met by any PAIS supporting flexible processes (cf. Table 3.1). To enable process variability at a technical level, PAISs need to provide support for *configurable process models* and for the context-specific configuration of particular *process variants*. To accom-

moderate the need for looseness, in turn, PAISs must provide support for *loosely-specified process models*, which do not require a completely pre-specified process model, but allow deferring modeling decisions to the run-time. Moreover, support for planned exceptions in terms of *exception handling support* as well as unplanned or unanticipated exceptions through the support of *ad-hoc changes* allowing for deviations from a pre-specified process model is needed. To adequately cope with business process evolution, PAISs require *versioning support for process models* (i.e., for deferred evolution) enabling the co-existence of different process model versions at the same time. Additionally, immediate evolution requires the *migration* of ongoing *process instances* to the new process model version. The problem of poor process model quality, in turn, requires adequate support for *process model refactoring* which improves the quality of a process model without altering the observable behavior. Finally, to provide feedback regarding the execution of real-world processes and to foster organizational learning, IT-support for *monitoring, analyzing and mining* flexible processes becomes crucial.

Table 3.1 Mapping Flexibility Needs to Technical Requirements

Flexibility Need	Dimension	Technical Requirement
Variability		Configuration
Looseness		Loosely-specified Processes
Adaptation	Planned	Exception Handling
	Unplanned	Ad-hoc Changes
Evolution	Deferred Evolution,	Versioning
	Immediate Evolution,	Process Instance Migration
	Poor Model Quality,	Refactoring
	Organizational Learning	Monitoring, Analysis and Mining

In addition to the support for variability, looseness, adaptation and evolution, flexible PAISs have to provide several other features to enable process flexibility in practice.

Accountability and traceability. Even though PAISs become less prescriptive with increasing flexibility, both traceability and accountability still need to be guaranteed. Organizations are required to comply with a wide range of regulations like Sarbanes Oxley (SOX) [339] or Basel II [43]. In the context of SOX, for example, it is important to be able to trace back *who* made *which* changes *when* and *why*. For this, executed activities as well as applied process changes have to be logged. If users need to bypass the PAIS, because a change requirement cannot be implemented quickly enough in the PAIS, traceability is no longer guaranteed and a mismatch between the PAIS and the real-world processes it supports exists.

Business compliance. In addition to accountability and traceability, compliance with existing rules and regulations is another fundamental issue. Despite the provided flexibility, it has to be ensured that (dynamic) process changes in PAIS do not

lead to such violations or that the reasons of such compliance violations are at least documented to ensure traceability as described above.

Access control. With increasing flexibility, PAISs become more vulnerable to misuse [355, 78]. Therefore, the application of changes at the process type as well as the process instance level must be restricted to authorized users.

Correctness of changes. When adapting or evolving business processes—potentially in the midst of their execution—it has to be ensured that changes are performed in a controlled manner and do not lead to run-time errors; e.g., crashed activity programs due to missing input data, deadlocks due to blocking activities, or data inconsistencies due to lost updates.

User support. With increasing PAIS flexibility the need for user support becomes more and more important [323]. While traditional PAISs provide little maneuvering room for their users, loosely-specified processes require many decisions to be made along the way and therefore require significantly more user experience.

Need for learning from process instance changes. Regarding *instance-specific process adaptations*, same or similar exceptions might occur more than once, making the reuse of existing exception handling procedures desirable [218, 360]. For example, the knowledge that a magnetic resonance tomography (MRT) could not be performed for a patient with cardiac pacemaker is highly relevant when treating other patients with the same or similar problems. Generally, when similar exceptions occur frequently, this often indicates a gap between the modeled processes and the corresponding real-world ones. This misalignment often stems from errors in the design of a process model or is the result of changing requirements. Therefore, flexible PAISs should continuously monitor deviations between a pre-defined process model and the actual process enactment in order to detect discrepancies between modeled and observed process behavior.

In the context of *loosely-specified processes* two process instances are rarely identical. However, similarities between process instances often exist. As a consequence, reuse of previously conducted process instances or the discovery of frequently occurring similar process fragments should be supported.

Concurrency of changes. Any PAIS supporting instance-specific adaptations should be able to cope with *concurrent* changes. In particular, PAISs need to handle situations in which instance-specific adaptations (i.e., ad hoc changes) and evolutionary changes overlap. This is especially important when evolution has to be immediate and not deferred.

3.4 Summary

This chapter discussed the flexibility needs of both pre-specified and loosely-specified processes in detail; i.e., adaptation, evolution, looseness, and variability. Based on these flexibility needs characteristic requirements were derived that any PAIS enabling flexible business process support has to fulfill. PAISs and their process models do not only need to be configurable, be able to deal with exceptions, and

allow for changing the execution of single business cases (i.e., process instances) on-the-fly, but must also support the evolution of business processes over time. Responsiveness to change is fundamental for any PAIS and thus continuous process model refactorings are needed to ensure maintainability, especially when process model repositories become increasingly large. Moreover, the monitoring, analysis and mining of processes is fundamental. In addition, this chapter discussed fundamental PAIS features that are also needed to accommodate the described flexibility needs in practice. In particular, traceability and accountability must be ensured at all times and changes need to be performed in a controlled manner to guarantee correctness. Furthermore, security constraints as well as compliance with existing policies and regulations need to be ensured. Flexible PAISs should also assist their users through recommendations and learning from instance deviations.

3.5 Book Structure

Fig. 3.3 depicts the overall organization of the remaining chapters of this book dealing with the four major needs for variability, looseness, adaptation and evolution.

Part II of this book deals with flexibility support for pre-specified processes. This part primarily considers predictable and repetitive processes. Chapter 5 addresses the need for variability in business processes and discusses techniques enabling process configuration support. Chapter 6 explores on the handling of planned adaptations through exception handling techniques, while Chapter 7 deals with unplanned exceptions and their support through ad-hoc changes of individual process instances. Chapter 8 discusses monitoring, analysis and mining support for flexible processes fostering the incremental evolution of business processes. Chapter 9 addresses the requirement for evolution and elaborates on versioning, instance migration and refactoring support. Part II ends with Chapter 10, which discusses business compliance issues in the context of process changes.

Part III of this book focuses on less predictable processes with a comparably low degree of repetition and deals with the need for looseness. Chapter 11 first provides an overview of different approaches and techniques realizing loosely-specified process models. With constraint-based processes, Chapter 12 then introduces one specific approach for realizing loosely-specified processes in more detail.

Part IV deals with the integration of data and processes and discusses the potential for increasing flexibility through such an integrated approach. Chapter 13 introduces object-centric, artifact-based, and data-driven approaches, while Chapter 14 deals with a specific framework enabling flexible object-aware and data-driven processes.

Finally, Part V focuses on tool support. Chapter 15 introduces the Aristaflow BPM Suite process management technology as a representative for a system supporting pre-specified processes including advanced support for adaptation and evolution. Chapter 16 describes Alaska, which provides support for different ap-

proaches enabling loosely-specified processes. Additional tools are discussed in Chapter 17.

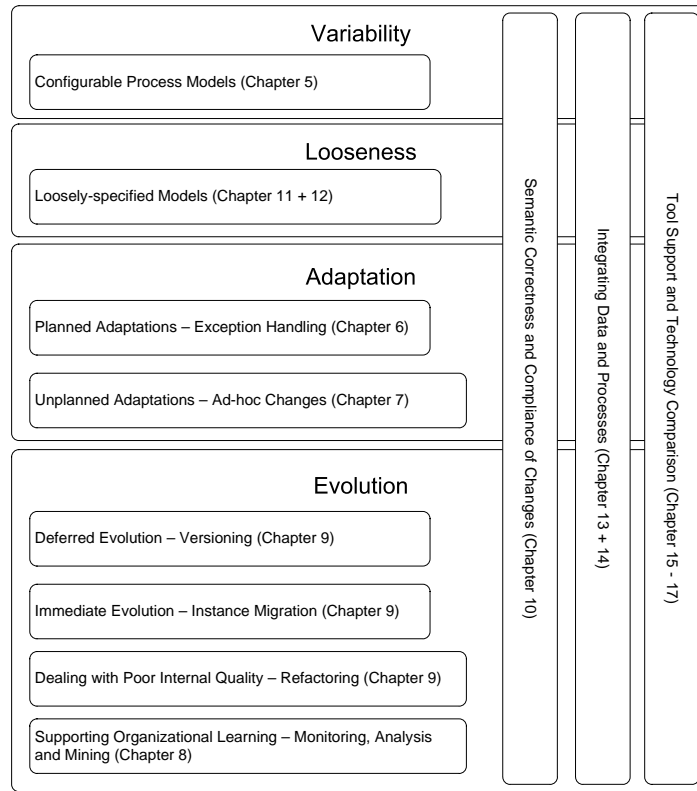


Fig. 3.3 Organization of the Remaining Chapters

Exercises

3.1. Flexibility Needs

In the following the check-in and boarding procedures from the perspective of two hypothetical travelers we will call Tom and Tina Traveler are depicted.

Tom Traveler wants to spend the weekend in Barcelona to explore the city his friends are so enthusiastic about. Since the flight is departing in 90 minutes from the nearby airport in Innsbruck, Tom calls a taxi, which arrives a few minutes later and

takes him to the airport which is just a few kilometers from his home. Tom arrives at the airport about an hour before departure. He then immediately goes to the check-in counter where he drops off his bag and gets the boarding pass. Since there is still enough time before boarding Tom decides to drink a quick coffee. Afterwards he gets through security, which is usually quite fast in Innsbruck and only requires a few minutes to complete. For this, Tom has to get his laptop out of his carry-on bag and puts it in the provided bin. He then places his bag as well as his jacket on the conveyor belt to be X-rayed. Having placed the laptop, his bag and the jacket on the conveyor belt, he waits for the signal to proceed through the metal detector. Once he has passed the metal detector, Tom is asked by the screener to take out his camera from the carry-on bag so that she can look through the lens. After this check he is allowed to repack. Tom then buys a newspaper and walks to the gate to wait for the boarding call. Five minutes later boarding starts and Tom enters the airplane.

Like Tom Traveler, Tina Traveler wants to spend the weekend in Barcelona. Tina takes the bus to get to the airport in Innsbruck and arrives about 20 minutes later at the airport. Having arrived at the airport she immediately goes to the check-in counter where she drops off her bag. Unlike Tom, Tina has already printed out her boarding pass at home. After baggage drop-off Tina immediately wants to get through security. Tina places her jacket as well as her carry-on-bag in the provided bin provided on the conveyor belt to be X-rayed. She then waits for the signal to proceed through the metal detector. After the check she gets her carry-on bag as well as her jacket. Tina then buys a newspaper and walks to the gate to wait for the boarding call. A few minutes later boarding starts and Tina enters the airplane.

- (a) How would you classify this process in terms of predictability and repeatability?
- (b) What kind of flexibility needs can you identify in this context?

3.2. Flexibility Needs

Give examples (others than the ones described in this book) for business processes requiring variability, looseness, adaptation, and evolution.

- (a) Give examples where process variability is required. What are the driving forces behind variability in these examples?
- (b) Think about processes that are characterized by non-repeatability, unpredictability and emergence and therefore require looseness.
- (c) Give examples for both planned and unforeseen process adaptations.
- (d) Think about situations where deferred evolution is sufficient. Give examples where immediate evolution is required. Use the taxonomy depicted in Fig. 3.1 to characterize the scenarios.

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