We were able to sit down recently with Jim Brusnahan, Director IT Business Relationship Management (BRM) - Global Manufacturing and Engineering Excellence at Johnson Controls in Wisconsin. An experienced Business Relationship Manager, Jim was willing to share some of his thoughts and experiences with us.

Q: Tell us a bit about your background and your current role at Johnson Controls

A: The journey started out quite far away from the IT and corporate world; as an enlisted infantryman in the U.S. Army 101st Airborne. The infantry turned out to be one of the greatest gifts and strengths of my entire career and life, and was an honor to be a part of. I know what hard is, and that a human can achieve anything they set out to do. That enabled me to get an engineering degree, leading to future roles of polymer engineer, engineering manager, plant management, operations management, and general manager.

Surprisingly, I ended up in IT a few years ago, but in hindsight it makes sense. My manager recruited me into a BRM role to support global manufacturing excellence and engineering excellence. I was to own the relationships with the chairperson of each of those teams, lead enterprise initiatives, and through a BRM capability, converge business and IT towards value creation within JCI. Today, my primary strategic focus is leading us towards the factory of the future with Manufacturing 4.0 in the Johnson Controls Manufacturing System.

Q: How long have you had BRM's at Johnson Controls? How many do you have? Who do they report to?

A: I am not sure how long we have had BRM's or roles similar to BRM, and the total number has been very dynamic. Even if I gave a number, the key aspect of that question is more the roles and responsibilities of a “real BRM”. Many have had the title BRM, thought they were part BRM, or went to BRM training, but I’d say that the majority were not in a true BRM role. I still often hear people in IT say that they talk to the business sometimes, so they are a BRM too. That is like an engineer saying they are a sales leader because they talked to a customer.

My team was formed about two years ago in the corporate headquarters, and our leader was quick to get us into true strategic BRM role thinking. She is a VP reporting to the CIO, who reports to our CEO. Our BRM’s in JCI are not centralized today, so there were, and are, existing groups within the business units with different ways of working and
achieving varied levels of success. There are 130,000 employees, so it’s a pretty large company. We are typically lined up functionally with the relationships we own; manufacturing, human resources, finance, etc. Keep in mind that it is not a quick “light switch” to turn on BRM roles. People often need to gradually transition into it as they move other non-BRM responsibilities into other teams, change thinking, and stand up a BRM organization. I was new into it, so I had no other roles to transition from, or other technical ownership roles to get rid of.

Q: How did you justify implementing a BRM capability to executive management?
A: Initially, our leaders did not need to justify BRM. They understood the need for a successful BRM organization to compete in today’s digital era. We’ve had leadership changes though, so the team needed to reprove itself. I’d say that the key aspects that helped do that were the professional approach and capabilities of our BRM team, and functional business leaders themselves speaking up about the value they are receiving from their BRM. Our team has some of the best talent in IT, and leaders noticed this.

Q: Business relationship management is about delivering value. What value does your team deliver to Johnson Controls? How is this measured?
A: The primary value realization measure would be the financial and business metrics that our initiatives have impacted. This of course includes top line and bottom line impact, as well as other functional metrics. For example, in manufacturing, there are plant scorecards, so we should be helping to drive those measures in safety, quality, delivery, etc. The BRM team has helped eliminate shadow IT and technical debt costs as we work with architecture to rationalize the application landscape. The demand shaping has brought in IT requests that are more aligned strategically as a whole portfolio, and better prepared for initiation and execution.

A simple litmus test is to look at projects that have a good BRM and those without BRMs. There is a drastic difference in the success and value realization. The chance a project even gets approved and funded, that the value realization and user adoption of a project meets targets, and teams are collaborating throughout the project all have a strong linear correlation to BRM.

Q: What have been the organizational challenges in implementing the BRM position in Johnson Controls?
A: The first challenge was establishing clearly defined roles and responsibilities. This can be a sensitive subject, but is critical to clearly understand. It is important that the BRM’s have consistent messaging, and understand where their roles begin and end. Even in our own IT department, some people are still confused about what a BRM is. You literally need a communication campaign internally for business and IT departments.

Once we knew what we were, we needed to integrate with our key IT departments both in relationship and process building; project management office, demand management, infrastructure, applications, architecture, security, etc. Then comes deploying the BRM’s into the functional business relationship that they own. Each of these will have its own unique challenge depending on the current state, leader personality, and past IT experience (usually not good). My areas started at a level 0 maturity; they would literally not even let IT into business meetings.
Q: What kind of individual or skill sets do you look for when bringing on a new BRM?

A: For a new BRM, some key aspects I personally look for are principled decision making, emotional intelligence and maturity, strategic thinking, a drive to learn and improve, ownership, communication skills, and the ability to handle conflict, ambiguity, and risk. The technical stuff can be learned. Besides, there are plenty of IT resources that know IT, and business roles that know their processes, but who has the skill to create a new strategy and bring them both together as one around it?

You must be a mini CIO. It is not at all for a person who is comfortable being an order taker, not skilled in conflict resolution, and just likes following process and tasks in a very ordered world. You need to be both a disrupting and a unifying force.

Q: Do the BRMP and CBRM classes help when bringing on a new BRM?

A: BRMP™ and CBRM™ are a tremendous help for a new BRM, or existing BRM’s. This naturally creates standardization, educates them on the target towards what a BRM is and is not, and gives confidence on how to do their job professionally. It also provides proven specific tools, approaches, and resources to start out with. This will go a long way in accelerating the BRM group’s maturity level as a professional team.

Q: What is your recommendation to companies that have not introduced a BRM capability in their organizations?

A: The digital era is upon us and businesses cannot win if their IT function doesn’t lead. And I do not see how IT wins and leads without BRM roles winning and leading. Many CEO’s and even CIO’s aren’t aware how crucial it is to have IT on the offense and establish a strong strategic BRM team to not only unlock and create tremendous value, but to survive amidst the Industry 4.0 revolution. They are stuck in traditional service provider, ROI, and IT as a cost center thinking. Tremendous collaboration is and will be needed, as well as someone out front strategically bringing in new technology and elevating all of IT to a strategic partner.

My recommendation is start BRM, and start it now. I’d also say let go of past failures with BRM too. It is like lean manufacturing; over 80% failed to get real sustained results with initial implementation, while the 20% had step changes in performance. It had nothing to do with whether Lean or the Toyota Production System is effective. BRM works and is powerful, but you need to do it right.

Q: You have been members of BRM Institute for several years. Tell us about this membership, the value you receive, and would you recommend membership to others?

A: Membership helps at a tactical and strategic level. I was surprised at how useful my BRM membership became. It made a difference and has a strong value proposition. I immediately liked it for the standardization it creates for a team and the support that can be received by mentors or the community. You also walk in with templates and tools to use.

Professional people of any discipline need mentors, trainers, and outside perspectives. A manager is only going to have so much time to coach, so outside resources help. It also gives a different perspective to situations. A BRM will end up in scary emotionally charged and stressful situations, and an outside voice and perspective helps navigate it. Keep in mind that it starts with the leader and individual. You can have a gym membership too and get awesome results or no results.
**Q:** What other advice would you share with business leaders to help them be successful with their BRM capability?

**A:** Talk with organizations that have successful BRM teams. I came from being a P&L leader in tier 1 automotive operations, so “BRM” sounded very fluffy to me and I was highly skeptical – “you manage relationships… wow, sounds like a hard day, there is an easy area to cut…” I quickly became a convert though, and fully understand the need and power of the BRM.

The digital technology era exponentially increases this. As a leader, it is important you understand the problem of not having BRM and huge opportunity to having BRM, otherwise you might not properly support it. Once this is understood, I’d talk to the BRM Institute. I think that is the fastest track to accelerate the approach on how to launch in a practical and pragmatic way. They often connect you with a leader like myself, so you can ask questions and get additional insights. The annual BRM Institute conference, BRMConnect, is also an outstanding place for leaders to learn and network as well within a wealth of experience and interactive open sharing.