

*In a world of constant and accelerating change, adaptability is the name of the game. That is why your company should focus on business rules today! In this article, Mr. Ross reviews the basic ideas of the business rules approach and why they are essential for your company.*

## When is a Door Not a Door? *The Business Rule Difference*

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One of the interesting things about consulting with different organizations on business rules and publishing a *Journal*<sup>1</sup> on that subject is that a lot of really silly rules cross my desk. Sometimes it feels like a Dilbert parade!

One of our readers recently forwarded a rule that raises some interesting questions. He observes that in his apartment building the doors to the stairwells all have signs on them saying, *Door must be kept closed at all times*. His question was, “Is a door you must never open really a door?” If the rule is followed religiously, he observed, the door might as well be considered part of the wall.

Well obviously not quite! Before addressing that tongue-in-cheek question, however, let’s do some analysis of this rule.

I think we can safely assume that the rule as stated is actually a shorthand. A more complete and accurate version might be, *You may use this door for entry, but it must be closed behind you*. If we wanted to be very complete, we might explain the basic motivation for the rule by adding, *Fire Door*.

Further analysis of this simple rule reveals fundamental aspects of the business rule approach, as follows.

- The rule was posted; that is, *written down*. Why? The answer lies in the motivation for the rule – its purpose is to protect the inhabitants against the dangers of fire. *When a rule becomes important enough, it is always written down.*
- The rule was written in plain English. If the rule were difficult to understand, or encoded in such way that many of the inhabitants could not readily interpret it, it would not serve its purpose very well. *A rule important enough to write down is worth writing down plainly.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Business Rules Journal*, [www.BRCommunity.com](http://www.BRCommunity.com).

- A *procedure* for this situation is not really needed. We could write one, of course, but in this case, it would probably be trivial (*approach door; grasp doorknob with hand; twist doorknob in clockwise direction; pull/push carefully ...*). Nonetheless, the rule is still crucial. *Rules can exist independent of procedures.*
- This rule – like all rules – serves to shape behavior. The posting of the rule reminds inhabitants, staff and others to close the door, and presumably they are therefore less likely to forget, or perhaps even block the door open. *The purpose of a rule is always to guide or influence behavior in desired ways.*
- The rule serves a purpose – it is neither frivolous nor arbitrary. Fire is a deadly risk, and all reasonable measures must be taken to protect against it. Business rules never arise in a vacuum; *there are always identifiable and important business factors motivating them.*
- The rule was posted right where the action is – that is, where actual entry can occur. This proximity to the action helps ensure the rule is followed as events actually unfold. *The best way to ensure rules are followed is to get them right in front of people at the exact point where the guidance is relevant.*
- The rule is undoubtedly part of a larger body of fire code rules for buildings. Even though the rule may be posted thousands of times for enforcement purposes, these postings arise from a single source. This ensures consistency. *If rules are important enough to be enforced, they are important enough to be single-sourced.*
- The body of fire-code regulations was undoubtedly produced by experts experienced in the field, and is backed by the political authority of the city or state. Changes must be reviewed, incorporated, and disseminated carefully. Because new dangers and liabilities can be discovered at any time, this process should be streamlined and efficient. In other words, *the rules must be managed.*

These commonsense observations represent the main ideas of the business rule approach. Your business undoubtedly has literally hundreds or thousands of such rules guiding its various business processes. Yet in practice, these basic business rule principles are seldom followed. In many organizations, the problem is so severe that the overall *governance* process has just about broken down.

Can you do something about it? *Yes!* The business rules approach offers proven solutions.

Now back to that question, “Is a door you must never open really a door?” The answer is obvious – yes, *of course it is*. A wall *without* a door will always just be a wall. If you need a door sometime in the future, you must remodel, and that means time and money (not to mention disruption for the inhabitants). If you have ever remodeled your home, you know exactly what I mean.

The wall *with* a door acts like a wall until such time that the *must-remain-closed* rule is discontinued. Then, with relatively little delay, expense or disruption, it becomes a functional door.

Think of the business rule approach as a relatively inexpensive way to build potential doors for your business in all those many cases they might one day be needed. That way you can avoid walling yourself in. In a world of constant and accelerating change, *adaptability* is the name of the game. That is why your company should focus on business rules today!

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## About Ronald G. Ross

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Mr. Ross is recognized as the “father of business rules.” He serves as Executive Editor of [www.BRCommunity.com](http://www.BRCommunity.com) and its flagship publication, *Business Rules Journal*, and is the author of eight professional books, including *Business Rule Concepts* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2005) and *Principles of the Business Rule Approach*, Addison-Wesley (2003).