

DETERMINING SEVERITY AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN PROCESS NON-CONFORMANCE INSTANCES

Preparation of Camera-Ready Contributions to ICSoft Proceedings

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Abstract: We have seen a variety of frameworks and methodologies aimed at dealing with non-conformance in processes presented in the literature. These methodologies seek to find discrepancies between process reference models and data returned from instances of process enactments. These range from methodologies aimed at preventing deviations and inconsistencies involved in workflow and process support systems to the mining and comparison of observed and recorded process data. What has not been presented in the literature thus far is a methodology for explicitly discerning the severity of instances of non-conformance once they are detected. Knowing how severe an instance of non-conformance might be, and therefore an awareness of the possible consequences this may have on the process outcome can be helpful in maintaining and protecting the process quality. Subsequently, a mechanism for using this information to provide some kind of recommendation or suggested remedial actions relating to the non-conformance for process improvement has also not been explored. In this paper we present a framework to address both these issues. A case study is also presented to evaluate the feasibility of this framework.

1 INTRODUCTION

Although research has been conducted in detecting deviations in processes in the past, very little research has been conducted in determining the severity of the non-conformance detected. Knowing the severity of detected instances of non-conformance is useful because it provides an indication of its possible implications. Therefore a severity indicator can aid in the provision of recommendation information to the administrators of the process – another area in process improvement in which little work has been presented. In this paper, we seek to provide a framework on how the severity of deviations and inconsistencies in processes may be ascertained and show how this information can be used to provide effective recommendations to process administrators.

In order to be successful in detecting non-conformance and ascertaining its severity, the process model must be defined and implemented in a formal and robust way. Informal process definitions result in an array of problems with process control, transfer

of process knowledge and adaptation to change (Rombach 1990).

There have been a number of different approaches presented in the literature with the goal of detecting process deviations. These include an approach presented by Huo, Zhang, Jeffery (2006) based on *process discovery*, where they compare a *discovered* process model to a pre-determined reference model to find discrepancies. *Process discovery* is a technique described in (Cook, Wolf 1998) where process data is mined in order to discover the process model from its enacted values. A fuzzy logic approach such as in (Cimpan, Oquendo 2000) was also presented, where again the idea is to compare a monitored process enactment to a reference model and take test for conformance. Our own research presented in (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007) is also aimed at detecting inconsistencies and deviations where specific values are defined for process activity attributes and activity transitions which are tested against reference values as they are being recorded.

In this research, we consider a “process” to be a set of one or more *activities* being smaller, simpler units or tasks which may be carried out sequentially, concurrently, simultaneously, overlapping or in parallel (Huo, Zhang, Jeffery 2006), (Rezgui et al. 1997). We also assume these activities are assigned to *actors* who are responsible for their enactment (Dowson, Nejme, Riddle 1990).

The concepts of *deviation* and *inconsistency* we adopt from (Cugola et al. 1996) where the authors distinguish between the two. We consider the values that hold for a given state or activity within a process to relate to inconsistencies whereas the conditions that define the rules of *transition* between activities/states relate to deviations. These assertions also hold in our previous research presented in (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007) which is the test system we have implemented this research extension into. When we use these terms, we are referring to the concept of “non-conformance” between a process prescription and an instantiation of its enactment.

When a “deviation” or “inconsistency” is detected, we are measuring the difference between an actual system or process variable and its expected value (Reese, Leveson 1997). The magnitude of this distance and its likely implications is very useful knowledge to a process administrator. If we are fortunate, a deviation may be considered to have only trivial consequences to the process goal or conversely even positive consequences. If however, the consequences are dire, knowing this promptly can be useful knowledge to have in curtailing the possible damage.

If we know how severe an instance of non-conformance is, we can use this information to provide useful feedback to the appropriate person. If the degree of non-conformance is minor, perhaps the responsible actor should be informed incidentally. If it is critical, a manager in the process or organization may need to be informed along with possible remedies urgently.

Predictably, processes which are executed more frequently are easier to define better boundary values for. These processes are therefore conducive to the application of Statistical Process Control (SPC) in order to implement better constraints and boundaries upon the process activities, as SPC requires a large sample of data before SPC can be adequately applied (Wang et al. 2006). The success of Statistical Process Control in quality control in production lines and manufacturing (Card 1994) saw its expansion

into other areas, such as food, packaging, electronics and software development (Cangussu, DeCarlo, Mathur 2003). Back in 1990 Lantzy argued that there was bias toward the application of SPC to manufacturing processes which are inherently different to the dynamic nature and changing parameters involved in the software process (Lantzy 1992). Nevertheless, SPC has since been successfully applied to the software process and has been applied in many worldwide high CMM level (4 and 5) organizations (Radice 2000).

The three sigma gap from the mean used in Statistical Process Control provides an excellent mechanism for detecting out of control values while triggering very few false alarms (Florac, Carleton 1999; Jalote, Saxena 2002; Florac, Carleton, Barnard 2000). It is also possible when observing out of control values as deviations, to determine exactly how far the value has deviated from the control limit, which gives us an idea of the deviations severity. The further the value from the control limit, the higher the severity.

Jalote et al (2002) argues that the key problem of SPC is to determine the uncommon causes of variation in a process such that the performance of the process can otherwise be predicted. The types of control charts used in processes may vary depending upon how frequent data points are in the process. Processes like software processes have infrequent data points and so a XmR or U chart is more appropriate than for processes used in manufacturing where data points are more frequent.

Another methodology to measure the process is the “six-sigma” methodology aimed at reducing defects in a given process such that it becomes as near perfect as possible. A process with six-sigma quality is a process with no more than 3.4 defects per 1 million opportunities, where an opportunity is a chance for the process to not conform (VanHilst, Garg, Lo 2005; Ferrin, Miller, Muthler 2005). Investment in improving a process beyond six-sigma is thought not to be cost-effective (VanHilst, Garg, Lo 2005).

The approach presented in this paper has two distinct goals. Firstly, we provide a framework for how severity may be measured in process inconsistencies and deviations both for numeric and non-numeric data types, which appears in section 2. Secondly in section 3, we show how this information can be useful in providing appropriate feedback which can be useful for process administrators. Section 4 provides an evaluation and conclusion for this paper.

2 SEVERITY

The notion of “severity” in this research is related to the effect non-conformance may have on a process. Therefore, we are concerned with not only the magnitude of difference between an actual value and its expected value, but also the consequences this anomaly may have on a) its associated activity (if applicable) and b) the process as a whole. We tackle this problem by first calculating the margin of difference in its own right, and then applying modifiers to the initial severity depending on the importance of the underlying values within the process, which is explained in section 2.3.

Given the distinction between the concepts “inconsistency” and “deviation” cited in (Cugola et al. 1996), determining severity in each is handled slightly differently. The initial severity rating of numeric and non-numeric data must be determined differently given the nature of the data. The major problem here is calculating the severity of both data types in such a way that the resulting severity ratings are relative to one another within the scope of the process. Also, as we explained in (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007), deviation data is always related to the transition of process activities and therefore always “non-numeric” in nature. Inconsistency data however *may* be numeric in nature and also can be related to the process as a whole, not just specific activities. Examples of process wide inconsistency types from (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007) include instances such as “too many exceptions” or “illegal activity count”.

In the interests of simplicity, every deviation and inconsistency detected may be given a simple rating when first detected, according to the scale portrayed in figure 1:

- **Minor** (slight deviation)
- **Average** (average deviation)
- **Major** (severe deviation)
- **NA** (indeterminable)

Figure 1 – Severity Scale

If for some reason, a deviation or inconsistency is detected but the severity is indeterminable, we rate it “NA”. Otherwise we rate it according to the scale shown in figure 1 with a default rating of “Average”. The method used in calculating these severity ratings for both numeric and non numeric data types is

explained in sections 2.1 and 2.2. This first step differentiates our model from any similar approach such as in (Cimpan, Oquendo 2000) where the fuzzy gap between the instantiated process and the model is apparent but not explicitly recognized.

2.1 Numeric Data Severity

For numeric oriented data types, it is a simple matter of placing boundaries and calculating whether or not an actual value is within them and if not, how far it is outside. If a large amount of data is available, Statistical Process Control is an excellent method in both placing the boundaries and calculating how far outside actual values might be (Florac, Carleton 1999). If there is not enough data available, we must set our own boundaries as best we can.

If there is enough data for SPC to be adequately applied, ascertaining severity of the deviation becomes a simple matter of measuring how many standard deviations the actual value returned is from the boundary. We can then apply an appropriate severity value based on the scale shown in previously in figure 1. If there is not an adequate amount of data to apply SPC, we need to calculate the level of severity of the out-of-bounds value by comparing the difference between the actual value and the boundary.

Care must be taken however, when deciding whether there is enough data present or not to rely on boundary values supplied by an SPC calculation. Our research presented in (Thompson, Torabi 2007) showed that rather a large amount of data was necessary before SPC may be adequately applied, and the point at which this threshold is reached is not always clear and always dependent on the nature of the particular process.

2.2 Non-Numeric Data Severity

In (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007), in order to determine if an inconsistency had taken place with non-numeric data, we compared the actual value against a list of accepted values. If the actual value did not match any of the values represented in the accepted values list, an inconsistency was flagged. To expand on this, for non-numeric list types we introduce another list of *unacceptable* return values and an appropriate severity value for each. An example of this concept is illustrated in figure 2, where we are checking for activity *actor type* inconsistencies.

Coding Activity		
Acceptable Values		Unacceptable Values
Value		Value Severity
Developer		Tester Minor
		Designer Minor
		Janitor Major

Figure 2 – Value Lists

If a value is returned which is not in either the “Acceptable” or “Unacceptable” list, a deviation will still be flagged but with an initial (before modifiers) severity rating of NA. We can therefore ease the workload involved in second guessing all possibilities of unacceptable return values. Any unexpected “unacceptable” values returned that initially have the NA severity rating can easily be re-rated later at the whim of the process administrator.

In (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007) conditions were specified by SQL checks on a relational database to test whether or not a condition holds. Deviations were recorded when either a condition was expected to hold but did not, or a condition was expected not to hold, but did. These conditions were sorted into related “condition sets” which specify the conditions in which a process activity can legally begin and terminate. An example of a condition set for the activity of a bank teller approving a bank deposit is illustrated below in figure 3 (taken from (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007)).

Precondition		
Rule Set		
Rule		Returns
Amount is < \$10,000		true
Rule Set		
Rule		Returns
Amount is < \$10,000		false
Activity "Police Check" Status == "Clean"		true

Figure 3 – Condition Set Example

In terms of severity, a severity rating is simply included with each condition set. If a deviation occurs because of one or more condition sets failing in an activity, then the severity of the deviation becomes the severity value of the condition set with the associated highest severity rating.

2.3 Modifiers

Once we have determined the severity of a deviation or inconsistency in its own right, we must then determine a) the severity of the impact this may have on its associated activity and b) the impact this may have on the process as a whole.

For deviations and inconsistencies relating to process activities, the illustration shown in figure 4 shows how we can set the importance activities may hold in the process and how this can modify the overall severity of the detected deviation or inconsistency:

Activity Importance Modifier		Deviation Importance	
Major	+	Major = Major	
		Average = Major	
		Minor = Average	
Average	+	Major = Major	
		Average = Average	
		Minor = Minor	
Minor	+	Major = Average	
		Average = Minor	
		Minor = Minor	

Figure 4 – Activity Importance Modifiers

For inconsistency types that hold for the entire process and are not related to any specific activity, the Activity Importance Modifier shown in figure 4 may be applied to the inconsistency data to give an importance rating with respect to the process, as though it was an activity in itself.

3 RECOMMENDATION

Once we have sufficient information about a deviation or inconsistency including a) that it has actually occurred (been detected), b) what part of the process it occurred in, c) when it occurred and d) the severity in relation to the process, we can feed this information to a simple type of “recommender system” to provide useful feedback to the administrator(s) or people involved in the enactment of the process. The actual implemented algorithm for the recommender system here may be susceptible to change, as some algorithms will perform better for different data sets (Herlocker et al. 2004) and different processes will return different sets of data.

Our approach incorporates a non-conformance log which records deviations and inconsistencies and which serves several purposes. If a process is enacted and a deviation/inconsistency is detected, we can record all relevant data in a history log which is related to a resolutions table which records

information on its resolution. The table is structured as shown in figure 5:

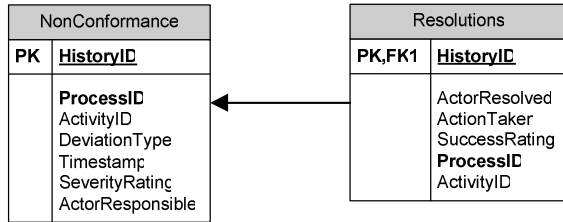


Figure 5 – Non-Conformance Logs

This non-conformance log provides several benefits to the process administrator. Firstly, we can query a list of unresolved deviations/inconsistencies from the table for any given process ranked by their severity for the process administrator to address. The Resolutions log also provides the capacity to enter data on how past entries were resolved, who resolved them and how successful the resolution was. Using the data in both tables we can extrapolate possible effective solutions to unresolved deviations and inconsistencies by matching them with similar resolved cases which had a high success rating, an important concept in recommender systems (McNee, Riedl, Konstan 2006). Lastly, because all instances of non-conformance are logged, it makes it easy to tell if one particular type of non-conformance or even specific activity or whole process seems to be experiencing more than its fair share of entries in the non-conformance table.

In the literature presented so far in this area of research, a recommendation system of any kind resulting from detection of an instance of non-conformance has not been published. Therefore, comparison with related works in regard to post non-conformance recommendations is somewhat limited in this instance.

4 EVALUATION

To evaluate this methodology we have developed an extension to the implementation used to evaluate the framework for non-conformance detection presented in (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007). To test the compatibility of our two deviation systems, we have simulated numerous instances of the bank deposit process also presented in (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007).

4.1 The Test Process

The process we have used to evaluate this model is the same as we described in (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007). We have simulated a simple process of how a person may deposit an arbitrary amount of cash in their bank account via a bank teller. A run down of the process is illustrated below in figure 6 which is incidentally also taken from (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007). This straightforward process is used to test the methodologies and techniques described in this paper in a simple setting where the return data can be easily understood and evaluated in comparison to our expected results.

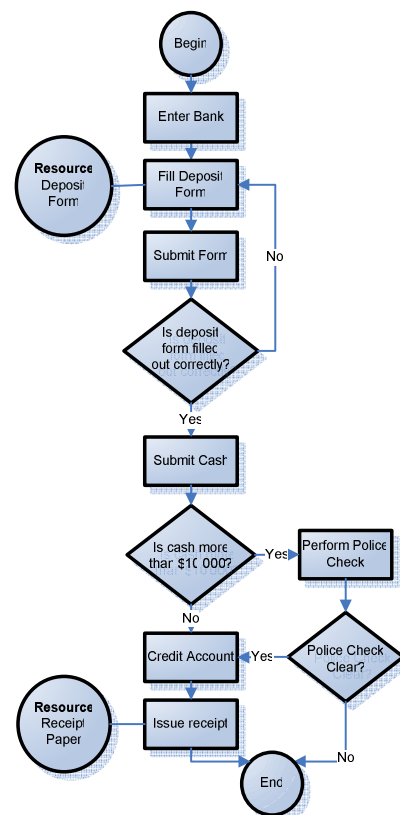


Figure 6: The Bank Deposit Process

The implementation used to simulate and test this process was developed using a C# .NET engine which was built to cater for the simulation of generic processes with generic activities. The example process was prescribed and constrained in a manner consistent with our methodology using this engine and all process data was contained in a relational database. Although a single database was used, the related tables within it are structured in three tiers – one to contain the prescribed reference constraints, rules and boundaries, another to structure recorded

instances of enacted process data and lastly a log to record detected instances of non-conformance along with their severity. Since all relevant data was stored in a relational database, all comparisons between reference and actual data were made via SQL queries. The inter-related tables within the database are illustrated in figure 7 which depicts the three tiers of data tables (image is partially modified from (Thompson, Torabi, Joshi 2007)):

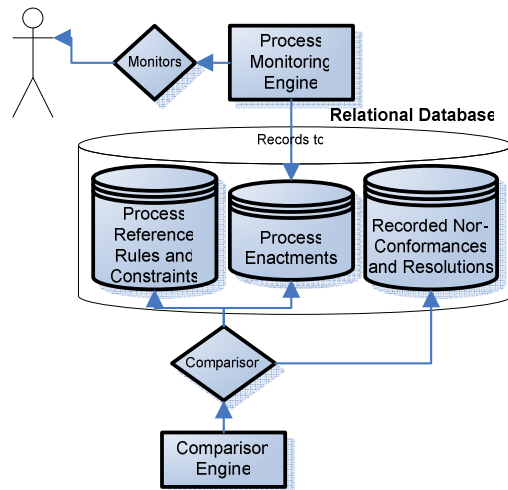


Figure 7: Framework Structure

4.2 Results

In terms of the non-numeric data, the return of expected results is easily identifiable because the methodology is simply a comparison of actual data to a list and each entry in the list has a severity value attached to it. The algorithm implemented was to check the accepted values list first and look for an entry identical to the actual return value. If the value was not found, it then checks the unacceptable values list. If the actual return value was found in this list, it returns the associated severity rating and if not, an inconsistency is still recorded along with a severity rating of “NA”. This is easily verifiable in the framework and we succeeded in identifying examples of both cases.

To simulate numeric data severity instances, such as time duration values, instead of attaching one min/max range to the data we attached three range sets. Further from our discovery reported in (Thompson, Torabi 2007) of just how large a dataset is required to adequately apply SPC ranges, each boundary value in each of the three ranges is user defined and applied in a manner consistent with what is shown in figure 8:

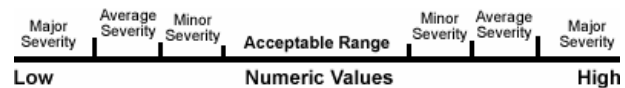


Figure 8: Numeric Ranges

The implemented framework only has to check the actual numeric return value against the boundary constraint values specified. If the actual value falls into a range that is not “acceptable” then it receives the applicable severity rating and an instance of non-conformance is recorded. For example, as part of the simulation twenty runs of the “Fill Out Deposit Form” were conducted and the time taken to complete the activity compared against the specified severity constraints. This data is illustrated in figure 9 below:

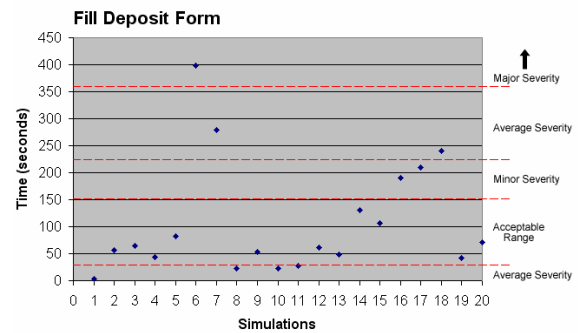


Figure 9: Example Simulated Data

The recommendation engine proved the most difficult to implement and at present the mining of the recorded data still needs improvement in our future work. However, given the structure of the non-conformance and resolutions log, the simplest way to find the most effective resolution for an instance of non conformance is to list all records in the non-conformance table with the same ActivityID, ProcessID and DeviationType as the record we are attempting to find a resolution for. Then, we match these records against those in the resolutions table where the resolution success rating is highest. At present we are rating the success of resolutions out of 10 in the implementation, so the recommendations system implemented so far is limited to a simple query which returns the most successful related resolution for a given deviation.

4.3 Future Work

The methodology presented here is relatively simple to implement and test, so the results we wanted and expected were easy to achieve simulating the test process. Our immediate future work in this area will be predominantly in 2 areas: dynamic severity

boundaries and better data mining for the recommender system.

We would like to examine further the development of dynamic severity thresholds to the boundary values of both numeric and non-numeric data types. This would aid the process administrator in automatically calculating severity thresholds so he or she does not have to set them manually. Also, we believe that given better querying and data mining methods, the data we are storing in the resolutions and non-conformance log could lead to better recommendations being generated when instances of non-conformance are detected.

5 CONCLUSION

In this paper we have presented a practical framework to ascertain severity in generic processes along with a basis for providing recommendations based on the resulting severities and process history. This framework is aimed at extending the research presented in detecting process non-conformance and is implemented as such. This body of work shows promise in its application to processes across different domains such as business, software or manufacturing processes – as long as the process is structured and there is ample opportunity for observing the relevant data. With this in mind, it is difficult for any kind of process improvement mechanism to be employed if the process in question cannot be properly observed. As stated in section 4, our future research in this field will entail an improved and more comprehensive mechanism for recommendation provision and also a mathematically formal model for severity determination.

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