

Analysts Anonymous

Informed comment for the BA & Business Change community

Presented in conjunction with:

A note from the editor



Happy New Year and welcome to the twelfth edition of Analysts Anonymous, a pleasingly round figure that is worth marking, unless you are completely wedded to metric!

As with the first edition we have a piece from Lawrence Darvill, this time looking at best practice in recruitment. At the sharp end of the job there is an article on Universal Modeling Language from an expert with a splendidly unexpected background (read the article to find out).

Lastly, to recognise the first dozen editions, we have put together an index of the issues to date and reprinted one of the earliest articles. See whether the topic covered then still rings true for you.

Enjoy the newsletter, and here's to the next twelve.

Anthony Madigan
Editor, Analysts Anonymous

Get Me a Good Business Analyst Lawrence Darvill Senior Consultant , Certes Analysis Resources

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Lawrence Darvill uses his experience in the recruitment industry to offer an insight in to recruiting the right BA for the job.



At a recent meeting a client described my work as “a necessary evil”. Fine words, coming from an accountant! So what does a recruitment agent have to contribute to the gamut of information already out there on business analysis best practise? This article focuses on the “necessary” - the need to recruit and to do it well. It is based on 5 years focused work in the BA market and argues that recruitment should be approached as you might approach a key project.

The title “Get Me a Good Business

Analyst” comes from a request that was made to me back in 2003. It said two things to me:

1. There was a recognition of the importance BAs could play in project success – a good BA making all the difference.
2. Did anyone know what made a good BA? I didn't, but that single request set me on a path to establishing a niche recruitment and information giving service.

Five years on, that's just what I have done and this is a condensed guide to some of the better recruitment practise we now see.

Let's start from the premise that recruitment is a simple process. Or should I say *can* be a simple process. It is

though a competitive market: competent analysts are hard to come by; a solid BA is very sought after; a good BA is extremely hard to find. This shouldn't mean that we "over-promise" to attract the best people. It does though mean though that we have an open, inviting and professional approach to our prospective candidate market.

BA Role in the ascendancy

It is worth bearing in mind that the BA role is a changing one. These are exciting times and we should be mindful of the shift in competencies as the role moves into the wider business change space. We need to consider where candidates sit on this progressive scale and where indeed your company is positioned. There is little point hiring a business change exponent when you are only offering a standard IT requirements gathering role.

The following factors are important if you are to get your recruitment and selection process right and in keeping with your real needs:

Timing

- Only go to market when you have the time to move through the recruitment process without delay. Clear space in the diary for interviews and assessment – plan your timelines and keep to them. The window for good permanent people may be as short as two weeks; for contractors it may be one day
- Engage quickly – interview within two weeks if the CV is of interest. A phone interview may not be ideal but may help you to engage more quickly if you or the candidate has a particularly busy schedule
- Consider meetings over breakfast, lunch or in the early evening – flexibility is important, particularly if you have a strong candidate

So many times we see companies work double time: they review CVs, take too long to progress to the next stage and then having lost the good candidates have to go through the whole process again. Candidates need clear timescales and minimum delay.

Knowing what you want at the outset is also vital. As business analysts you pride yourself on strong definition work and getting the start point right, so why should recruitment be any different? The majority of briefs we see are well thought out, but we still see the extremes, from a few lines on an e-mail requesting "a business analyst with a background in web

technologies" to the 10 page job descriptions. So what should a good job description include?

Job Description or Briefing Document

This is probably the first document your future applicant will see. They will be asking themselves some questions: How seriously does this employer consider the role of the business analyst? What time have they taken to perform their own analysis of the role? How have they presented their findings? I know this is preaching to the converted, but a comprehensive yet punchy introduction to the role, team and company will work wonders for initiating a strong contact with your potential audience. We should then detail;

- Background to the organisation – (key markets, strategic goals, prevailing culture)
- Background to the BA role within the company
- The position's overall purpose and context
- Specific priorities and objectives of the role
- Team size – matrix managed or dedicated team?
- Key duties and responsibilities – (essentials and desirables)
- Career structure – is there scope for progression?
- Outline salary and benefits, holidays (avoids later misunderstandings!)

You have done the brief for the candidate, now it's time for the candidate to brief you. An example profile is available on request.

The CV

I'm not going to enter into the debate about the right length of a CV. There are many different views on this and all I will say is that you should request the candidate's own CV rather than an agency formatted copy – after all this is their first piece of written communication you will see and it should be a clear and concise document. A couple of other points:

- If you are using an agency, get them to do the legwork against your criteria, highlighting clear examples of relevant experience on a front cover to the candidates CV.
- Put together an example front sheet that you can give to the agency. If this is worked to properly, two thirds of responses could be cut out allowing you to focus your time on the best candidates quickly.

Concentrating on these areas right from the first contact will also focus the candidate on key competencies and experience: Are they comfortable running large workshops? Have they taken a lead role

in designing solutions? When have they dealt with senior stakeholders or worked with a particular methodology? This provides a rationale for the process and means that there are no surprises later in the process.

Selection Process

This is best done in one session; put aside half a day to do a proper job. There are several options for using this time to best effect and again different opinions on which methods yield the best results. Briefly:

Interview

I once read that interviews that take the form of a “CV walkthrough” can deliver reliability scores as low as 7% in terms of predicting future performance. The use of competency-based questions (drop me a line if you would like to see some sample questions) can dramatically improve the reliability of the interview. Even with a relevant set of competency questions you need some way of better predicting future performance, hence the exercise:

Exercise

The exercise very often provides a better insight into how a candidate performs by asking them to undertake a work-related task. We never quite have the luxury of someone coming into the workplace and having a “trial run”, however we can design exercises around common work tasks or issues facing the business. If possible, the exercise should be based on real events, but make sure that names are removed to protect the innocent! Some companies swear by this approach, and I feel it is incredibly useful.

Time-bound Case Study



This tests the ability to:

- assimilate information quickly
- develop a strategy for solving a problem
- present confidently and persuasively, including taking questions
- work under pressure

It is up to you how much information you give up front; normal practise is to forewarn the candidate that they

will be asked to complete a case study exercise but not to give the actual content until the day itself.

You should also consider giving a candidate time with the BA team. 30 minutes with your “stayers” or high flyers can be an invaluable measure of how new people interact.

BCA assessment

Are you aware that there is a dedicated online competency assessment tool available to the BA profession? This is probably the only tool available that is designed entirely for benchmarking BA capability within the profession as a whole. Candidates can complete the assessment at any stage in the process and results are available within minutes of completion. Not everyone has been a fan of the online assessment, but it is interesting that those people who aren't fans have usually scored poorly. Make of that what you will.

The majority of feedback we have is that the assessment is a reliable benchmarking tool. It provides a feel for whether a BA is on the case in terms of their role, wider experience and their intuitiveness. The assessment should not in itself be used as the only tool you rely on for predicting future performance. It does though make for a good supporting measure.

The Offer

We never ask companies to compromise, but when there is a strong candidate we do ask clients to move quickly and act decisively. Remember that accepting permanent and contract offers online is legally binding and can maintain the tempo of the process. This is distinctly preferable to the proverbial “waiting for the paperwork” stage. If there is any uncertainty, the answer must be “no”. Again a competitive market means you will have to compete for staff and you can't win them all! There will always be factors outside your control: better pay, better location or a friend that works with the competitor. We are looking though to maximise those factors within our control.

So in summary;

- Treat recruitment as a project with a positive outcome and tight deadlines
- Prepare well and set aside the necessary time
- Use all available tools: competency questions; the exercise; the BCA assessment
- Act decisively to secure the services of the genuinely strong candidate

Business Analysts and the Unified Modeling Language

By Mike Crawford

Mike Crawford offers an insight into the world of UML and presents some practical applications.

If you're not already familiar with the Unified Modeling Language, I'd like, here, to persuade you to take the time to learn and use it in your work as a Business Analyst. This is not because I teach it on training courses but because I use it in my analysis work and I know the value of doing so.

Incidentally, if you're British and don't like to see 'modeling' spelt with only one 'l', feel free to hallucinate a second one.

So, why would a Business Analyst be interested in the Unified Modeling Language? Well, for me, that raises some other questions which include, why would a Business Analyst want to model anything in the first place and, if they do want to, what?

If this seems like way too many questions, bare with me. There is a point.

Why would we want to use models?

For the purpose of this article, I want to alight on four things that models do for us.

Thing number one that models do for us.

Models are a useful way of recording what we know in an unambiguous form.

Consider the following fragment of a process model (figure 1). The notation shown here is from the UML Activity Diagram and the large black dot represents the start of the process.

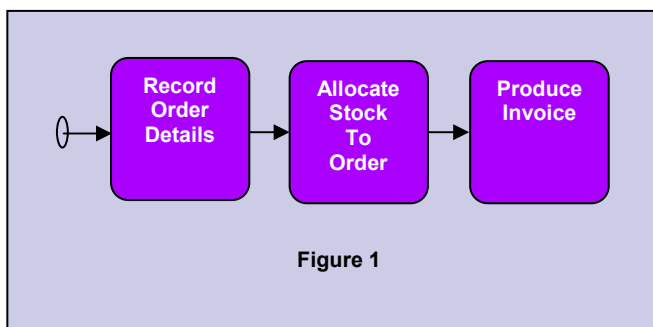


Figure 1

We might have recorded this information in a textual description saying, 'We need to record an order, allocate stock to it and produce an invoice'. Having agreed, at the time, that this text accurately reflected the business need, our client might later say, 'I didn't mean in that sequence. I just meant we did all those things. Actually, we don't allocate the stock until we've produced the invoice'. That's the problem with text – it's always ambiguous and, consequently, a great way to create misunderstandings.

In contrast, the model (figure 1) isn't ambiguous. It might be wrong but it's unambiguously wrong. There's no way you could argue that it implies invoice production before stock allocation.

Thing number two that models do for us.

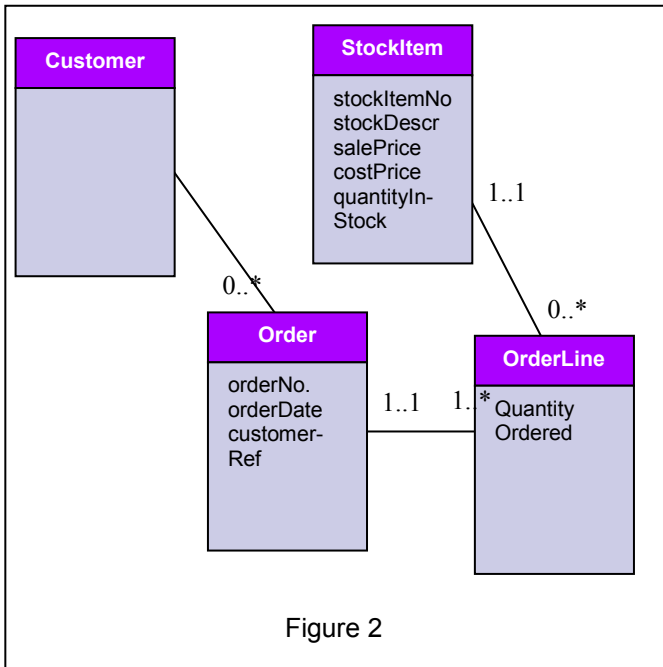
The second benefit of modelling is communication. It's a lot easier to walk a client or colleague through a model than to merely talk about a process or describe it in text.

And don't think that your clients can't understand (so called) technical models. They know what 'Record Order Details' means. They don't run away screaming 'It's in a box! It's got arrows! Be afraid'. If you're dumb enough to use techie words like 'function' or 'class' (see below) when you present a model to a business client, you deserve the good kicking that you'll probably get. Save it for the techies. They love it. You can bond.

Thing number three that models do for us.

Modelling tells us what we don't know and, by inference, what questions we need to ask.

Let's suppose that our client has indicated that their business needs to record information about customers, orders and stock items. Figure 2 (below) represents these needs diagrammatically. It's a UML Class diagram.



If you're not familiar with this type of model, each box represents something (called a Class) that the organisation wants to keep data about – StockItem, for example. Notice that the names of Classes are singular. It's called Customer not Customers. Customer is the classification (hence the word Class) and there will probably be many examples (or instances) of the class Customer. Mike Crawford might be one instance of a Customer and Debbie Paul, another.

Each class contains a list of the items of information that we want to keep about it. So, for a given stock item, you'll see that we want to record its stock number, description, sale price and so on.

The Class model (figure 2) makes it immediately apparent that we don't know what details the organisation wants to keep about a customer. Either nobody's asked or, if they have asked, they haven't documented it. Whatever the reason, we can see there's some outstanding work that needs to be completed.

Let's look at a little more of the detail in figure 2.

A line between two class boxes shows that those classes are, in some way, associated. Unsurprisingly,

this organisation thinks that orders are associated with customers because orders come from customers.

Numbers also appear on the model. They're at each end of each association line and represent something called 'multiplicity'. Multiplicity defines how many things are associated with other things. For example, on the association line between Order and OrderLine, there is a '1..*' at the OrderLine end. This means that any given order (order number '12345', for example) must have a minimum of one (1) up to (..) a maximum of any number (* means no limit) of OrderLines.

Looking at the other end of the line tells us that an OrderLine must be associated with one (and only one) Order. That is, a minimum of one up to a maximum of one (1..1).

To put it more plainly, if someone places an order, they must be ordering something and could be ordering lots of things. Also, you can't have an order line that isn't attached to an order – you wouldn't know who'd ordered it or when.

We can also see that a customer can be associated with many orders. However, we could have customers who aren't associated with any orders. This is shown by the '0..*' at the Order end of the association between Customer and Order. In English, this means the business wants to be able to keep information about a customers who haven't actually ordered anything yet. They probably send them junk mail.

You'll perhaps notice that the number of customers associated with a given order has not been noted on the model. Can an order be from more than one customer? We don't know. More importantly, we know we don't know. But, we should know, because this reflects a business rule. Does the business allow multiple customers to be associated with a single order? It may not seem likely but we should ask because it's just the kind of thing that doesn't surface until new systems are in place and they don't do what the client wants. I'm sure this doesn't happen where you work but, you'll be shocked to learn, it does happen in many organisations.

So, the modelling drives us to ask more detailed (and relevant) questions. If the business analysts don't find out this stuff, who will? And, when?

Let's be clear. This isn't geeky techie stuff. This is about business rules. It's about the information needs of the organisation and it's part of the work of aligning systems (IT or otherwise) with corporate objectives and critical success factors. This is within the domain (and responsibility) of the BA.

Thing number four that models do for us.

To do any job well, it is advisable to approach the work in a methodical, systematic way. This should be as true for business analysis as it is for brick laying and brain surgery.

Any systematic or methodical approach to a task entails partitioning the work into discrete, manageable chunks that can be addressed separately (and often concurrently) and later combined to reach the desired outcome.

Models help us to focus on the problem or domain area from different perspectives (the data perspective and the process perspective, for example) and later to combine these views to form a more complete understanding.

Incidentally, this is jolly useful for project management as well. The different models are 'deliverables' or, in PRINCE2, 'products'. They can be quality reviewed, signed off and deemed complete (or not) against the project plan.

What things would a BA want to model?

This, of course, is rather dependent on the circumstances of any particular project. There are some pretty common models though. BAs tend to do a lot of process modelling. They should model data. They'll often want to identify the system functions required to support business processes and they sometimes want to explore the way data will change over time in the system.

UML provides models for all of these needs (Activity Diagrams, Class models, Use Case diagrams and State Machines) and a lot more besides.

Why would we want to use UML models?

If modelling is a form of communication, or language, then there are certain truisms that must apply. Let's consider two of them.

The first is, if we all speak the same language, we're much more likely to understand each other than if we don't.

On training courses, I often ask BAs what they do. One common answer, among others, is that they act as a translator between the business and the computer systems staff. The Unified Modeling Language provides a common vocabulary for those working in and around Information Technology. And, as intended, it's becoming the world wide standard so we'll find people communicating with UML as we move from organisation to organisation and country to country. This not only makes us more employable (good enough reason in itself) but also aids understanding between organisations. This becomes ever more significant as outsourcing and other third party software supply increases.

The second truism is, the larger the vocabulary a language has, the more subtle, detailed and exact communication can be about a wider range of subject matter. UML has a very rich lexis so the techies will use the same models as the BAs but can add the additional information that they require as and when needed. This is important because, if the analysts use one language and the technical folks another, important understandings will be lost or altered during the translation.

Conclusions

To sum up then, models record what we know and help us communicate and confirm our knowledge. They also tell us what we don't know and identify questions we should be asking to fill in the gaps.

The Unified Modeling Language provides a comprehensive vocabulary covering the lifecycle all the way from process mapping through to the deployment of software and hardware into the business. And, it's increasingly used and understood by people in and around computing so your investment in learning it will be time well spent.

I'd like to point out that this 'investment' is not all that large. The two models presented in this article were, I hope, easy enough to understand (if they weren't, it

was my ineptitude so apologies for that) and, as with any other language, the more you use it, the easier it becomes to communicate elegantly with those around you.

Mike Crawford is a trainer and consultant in business analysis and systems development. He has also been a roadie for Thin Lizzy. Both of these statements are true.

The First Twelve Issues

Thanks to all of you who have been with the newsletter since its first edition. For those of you unlucky enough to have missed some of the earlier editions, we thought it was time to list the articles featured in each newsletter since Analysts Anonymous debuted in August 2003. And as an added bonus we are reprinting an article from Edition 2 which still has resonance in the current market. The vexed subject of matrix management has always generated debate, and I'd be interested to know how relevant the issues raised in this article are to you and your organisation.

Email me at AA-editor@writethetalk.com.



Matrix Management vs Traditional Management

"The author's career has been focused squarely within applications development, typically managing teams within IT that work closely with the business. The author has undertaken both Business Analysis and line management roles. The article considers the changing management of the Business Analysis discipline within a blue-chip company and reflects upon successful project delivery from a line management perspective. Given the nature of the article it is published anonymously."

What are the benefits to the Organisation?

Matrix management of resources gives any large IT department greater resourcing flexibility and its staff acquire a broader range of skills. It also encourages the efficient use of contract resources within the company, as the use of a contract resource fits neatly into the standard working practices of the IT department as a whole. In summary then, matrix management is a powerful tool for senior IT management to manage variations in workload.

Are there benefits for the individual?

Staff also benefit in some significant areas: their regular appraisals require input from both line managers and project managers, providing a balanced, and more objective, assessment of their performance. Staff also find themselves gaining experience of different business, system and technology areas, adding to job satisfaction and opening opportunities to those who might otherwise get stuck in a 'subject matter expert' rut.

Are there any downsides?

Yes – many! Software development is a people business. People are not sub-routines that simply follow instructions. Ignore the people side of software development and the delivery suffers. Team working, the definition of roles and responsibilities and career development structures require special emphasis in a matrix management structure.

Project Team Working

Matrix management puts a heavy emphasis on good project management, especially during project and phase initiation periods. Traditional development teams show considerable loyalty to their managers and to their team as a whole. However matrix managed project teams sometimes demonstrate ownership issues from the outset that are never resolved.

Teams of people don't immediately gel. Systems people are not always the most gregarious of individuals. It takes time for people to learn how to work together efficiently, to accommodate each other's strengths and weaknesses. When a team is newly formed people tiptoe around each other, exploring strengths and weaknesses and testing the boundaries of their roles and responsibilities. This causes a period of ineffectiveness, which needs to be minimised through good management from the project manager. This is contrary to many popular views about matrix management – where it is often assumed that the resource managers are the only ones who need to be skilled in 'soft' peo-

ple management techniques.

Line Management

Line managers (resource managers) find themselves with a complex role within the office. Their job involves the quality assurance of the work delivered by their staff, balancing people needs against demands from project managers, and ensuring that their staff are fully utilised. The quality of the work delivered depends on a wide range of factors, including training, experience, attitude and morale. The line manager is responsible for these four aspects of the individual's performance.

Line managers find themselves monitoring project progress to identify unexpected resource demands. Project progress is not often to plan: some resources are released early (often a good thing, but not always) and some are retained on 'priority work' when they should have moved to another important project.

Rather like the old school football team selection process, some resources are nearly always the last to be taken to join a project – yet these weaker people require the most development. It becomes difficult to coach junior or weaker staff at times when they are working on different projects to their mentors. Also line managers find themselves managing conflicts between project managers vying for the most competent resources. Conflicts frequently arise between line management and project objectives (most frequently meeting deadlines vs. training & development). Resource planning thus becomes a key skill for line managers.

It can be difficult to manage staff during periods of inactivity between projects – it is not so easy for the line manager to identify worthwhile 'background tasks' as it is in the traditional management environment. It is useful for the department as a whole to identify non-urgent background work that can be undertaken when slack periods are experienced.

Other Pitfalls

- Generally project demands dominate departmental objectives. People issues are given a lower priority unless the line management function is given significant seniority within the organisation.

- Lack of uniformity in procedures between Project Managers will confuse staff switching between projects.
- Staff can end up handling resource conflicts themselves if the line management role is not given sufficient strength in the organisation – this can lead to stress in the workplace, excessive working hours, low productivity and poor morale.

Summary

Matrix management is a powerful tool for any medium to large IT organisation. However its introduction can cause noticeable deterioration in departmental performance unless some key areas are given sufficient attention and investment.

Requirements for Success

- A strong line management function. The line managers must be given significant seniority in the organisation so that they can defend the longer-term interests of both their staff and the organisation.
- Stability in the line management structure. Because staff frequently switch projects, stability in line management gives them a sense of 'belonging' and an opportunity to plan their career progression in a structured manner.
- Focus on individual training & development (a key benefit perceived by staff and a means of making the resource pool more flexible).
- Don't burn staff out by only ever using them on projects where their activity will always be at its most intense.
- Strong, documented standards for development, support & maintenance and project management methods.
- Recognition of the need for investment in other internal infrastructure costs, such as centralised resource planning, resource demand planning and structured staff development programmes



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Edition 11 - Summer 2007

The Bigger Picture of IT-Enabled Business Change

Dr Sharm Manwani, Henley Management College

Business Analysis is for Softies

Anne-Marie Hyslop, Matthews Craig Consulting

The Problem of Requirements

Malcolm Eva, Eva Business Learning

Business Analysis: It's Not Just About Requirements

James Cadle, Assist Knowledge Development

The shift that business analysts make when taking a far broader view of the organisation

How greater depth to soft skills can make for increased delivery

An evaluation of various techniques for eliciting business requirements in order to adopt the most suitable for a given situation

How being a BA is about addressing and solving business issues

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