

## Business Analysis – to maturity and beyond

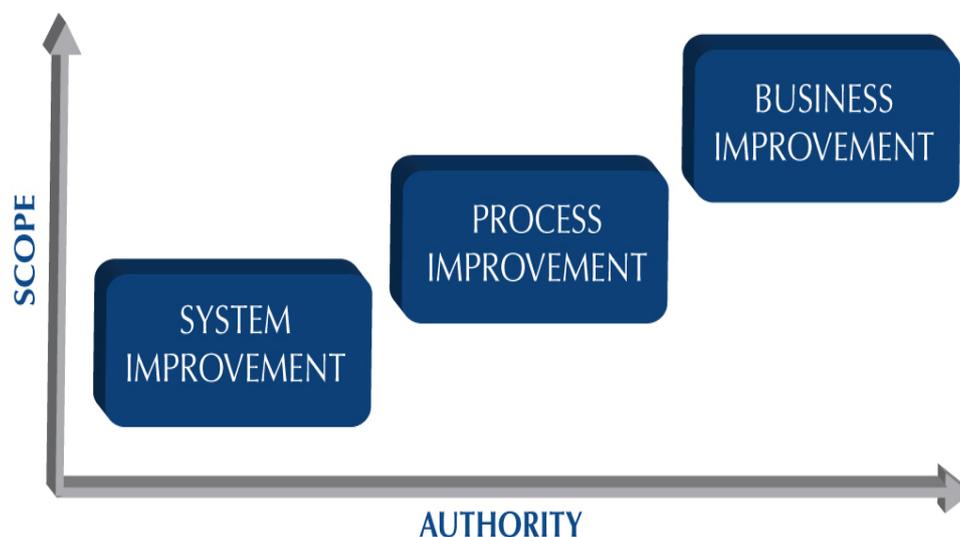
It is not entirely clear when the terms ‘business analysis’ and ‘business analyst’ first entered general use. Originally they weren’t used in connection with Information Systems-related work at all but were used in the context of financial business analysis. They have now, to a large extent, supplanted terms such as ‘systems analyst’ and ‘organisation and methods analyst’; it could be said that Business Analysis as we understand it today is the offspring – or merger - of these two older disciplines.

There is no disputing that Business Analysis has been around for over two decades, so this should mean that the discipline has entered a period of maturity. As a consultant and trainer, I have met hundreds, possibly thousands, of business analysts and they have provided some invaluable feedback on their various roles and responsibilities. Over the years, many business analysts have reported dissatisfaction with the way their role is perceived in their organisation – in particular a lack of clarity about the nature of the role and the desire to use their skills more effectively. Whilst the work has ranged from developing process models (as an end in itself sometimes) to trying to specify IT system requirements (possibly a job more suited to systems analysts), the business analysts have felt that exactly where they fit into the overall process of business improvement is always variable and often unclear.

However, in recent years there has been a sea change as different levels of business analyst role have been defined. The Business Analysis Maturity Model was developed by the AssistKD team to reflect these different BA levels, showing the trajectory for the development of the business analyst’s role along two dimensions:

**Scope** – this represents the breadth of the business analyst’s role, varying from a specific focus on improving an individual system, to a wider examination of business processes and, ultimately, to considering improvements across an entire area of the organisation.

**Authority** – this refers to the degree of influence wielded by the business analyst and the growth of their ability to influence the thinking of the management of the organisation.



In looking at the three levels, at the bottom-left of the model, the business analyst is working on projects where initial options have been considered, decisions have been made and the scope of the project has been defined. At the middle level, the business analysts are working cross-functionally, improving the business processes. By the top-right of the model, the business analyst will be working with senior management to consider the range of business improvement options available to the organisation, prioritize the portfolio of projects and ensure that the analysis work focuses on achieving the business objectives. Thus taking a more holistic approach to the business improvement/change.

The development of different levels of business analyst and the extension of the role to that of an internal consultant have been formalised in many organisations. Today, an increasing number have a well-developed BA practice staffed by highly-skilled and experienced business analysts. Typically the business analysts also hold professional qualifications that have provided them with a range of tools to deploy as required. In addition, they are clear about the contribution that business analysts can perform if they are given the opportunity. In these organisations, the senior business analysts guide and mentor the more junior analysts and there is a separation between the levels of work the analysts can perform. The senior business analysts recognise that they have the ability to analyse business problems, looking for root causes rather than just leaping to a quick, and often less effective, IT resolution. They are able to decide how the analysis work should be conducted on a project because they understand the range of potential approaches and techniques, and when it would be useful to adopt them. At the most experienced level, they are also able to advise senior management on the priority of projects.

However, there is still a sense, in some organisations, that the expertise offered by the analysts is often ignored. While business managers are there to manage and make decisions they may not be the best people to analyse the factors contributing to a problematic, or less than effective, business area. Senior managers may be too remote from the day-to-day work to see where bottlenecks and problems are occurring and front-line managers are often too close to the action to take an objective view. And, they are all rather busy carrying out their day-to-day work.

Aligned to this, there also appears to be limited recognition of the range of skills the business analysts possess. Often the initial 'early engagement' work is conducted without analyst input, running the risk of projects that will deliver only limited improvements or may even fail to address the underlying causes of problems.

Yet, this is where the internal business analysts have the potential to offer real value to organisations. They can offer an objective view that is based upon an analytical approach. They can bridge the different aspects of business performance, not least of which involves possessing a good understanding of the capabilities and limitations of the organisation's IT systems. They can take a holistic view, understanding how all of the elements of the business situation need to work collectively in order to really achieve a successful result. In the current economic situation, they also tend to be less expensive than external consultants.

Perhaps the lack of recognition derives from where business analysts sit in the organisation. There is an ongoing debate about the pros and cons of locating the business analysts in 'IT' or in 'the business', often reflected in frequent, cyclical reorganisations. Perhaps we could apply the principles of business analysis to this question and challenge the received wisdom, by asking whether there are other options. There are some organisations where the business analysts sit within functions dealing with business strategy or business change. These may be preferable as they are closer to the business objectives and provide a focus for business analysis within the business change lifecycle rather than divorced from it.

Ultimately it would be interesting to picture another possibility - to create a Business Analysis specialism that stands separately. A specialism staffed by highly-qualified professionals, with a defined career development path and a corresponding level of authority within the organisation. If we develop this vision, this specialism would be led by a Director of Business Analysis or perhaps a Chief Business Analysis Officer (CBAO) with an allocated budget for ongoing business analysis work and the authority to insist that business analysts are used to their greatest extent. If business analysis is a mature discipline and the expertise is available in organisations, surely this is a logical move. And from there it would be a short step to the first CEO with business analysis expertise. Now that really would aid business improvement!

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