

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE BUSINESS ANALYST

Excerpt from: **Business Analysis: A Systems Approach to Solving Business Problems**

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Essence: As in most occupations and roles in the organization, there are a number of principles that apply to the successful completion of the job. Some of the principles are high-level and generic while others are specific to an area of concern. The following is a list of such principles that apply to the role of business analyst.

The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted with the old problem, of what to say and how to say it.

– Edward R. Murrow

The business analyst is a role that can be played by any job or position, from developer to upper-level management, and must be a role that is played in any successful business problem-solving effort. The tenets in this book are aimed at those who must play that role so that they may play the role successfully. The following represents a summation of those tenets and principles.

Principle 1 – Focus on the Product

The business analyst focuses on the product not on the project

The project is the domain of the project manager and the solution team. The product is the result of that project. The business analyst starts with the end in mind [Covey89] and keeps it focused. The business analyst's responsibility is to solve the problem, and get that product into the business environment.

Understand what a solution is worth to the business

At any time the business analyst can tell anyone the value of the change being made to the organization, and, for the most part, to any component of that change. Each feature and function created by the solution team plays a part in the overall solution and each has its intrinsic value. The business analyst always knows "why".

Principle 2 – First Define the Problem and Then the Solution

Requirements describe the solution to a defined, understood and approved business problem

Here is a complaint from a senior business analyst: "Most projects are in design-mode long before they have established what the problem that they are trying to solve has been defined as. Too often I see project teams discussing how the screen is going to look and what push buttons are going to do before anyone knows what business problem we are trying to fix."

The set of requirements that the business analyst creates describes the solution to the business problem in terms that the business community can understand and agree will completely and accurately solve their problem. The technical community can also understand what needs to be done so they can completely and accurately create the software to solve the problem.

Principle 3 – Users Do Not Have Requirements

Users do not have requirements; stakeholders do not have requirements – they just have information

The business analyst seeks that information and analyzes it to produce the solution document containing the requirements.

Principle 4 – Focus on Information Not Individuals

Start by determining what information you need to solve the problem. Use the information gathering plan to help structure the information gathering process. Always keep the focus of the elicitation on gathering information.

No part of the solution should be based on only one source; all parts of the solution should be verified, confirmed and validated, preferably by someone or something other than the source of the information that produced that part of the solution.

Principle 5 – Separate Elicitation from Analysis

When eliciting information, do not analyze; when in analysis, do not create information

While eliciting information, the business analyst focuses only on getting as much information as possible. Analyzing the information as it is acquired appears as though the business analyst is judging the responder and will stem the flow of information. During analysis, the opposite is true. Any new information created while analyzing is a business analyst's assumption. The facts only come from the business.

Principle 6 – Improve the Process First, Then Add Technology

Evaluate non-IT solutions first before resorting to computers and software to solve the business problem

Since most business analysts come from IT, there is a natural tendency to assume that all business solutions can be solved with information technology and that the only solution to a business problem is by applying the use of computers. Many times, however, there are much more elegant and simple solutions to business problems: changing processes, relocating process workers, redistributing the work, and so forth.

Focus on the business, and how IT can be used to improve and enhance the business's status quo

Look for human solutions rather than technical ones. IT will come up with the technical solution to support the human business interaction. The business analyst has to make sure that the technology will be used comfortably by human beings. Keeping focused on the human aspects of the solution keeps the business analyst focused on the business as much as the technology and that balances the solution.

Constantly review and appraise the organization's processes and operations to determine where changes can be made that will add value to the organization

Every solution is the source of new problems. Every problem has ancillary and dependent problems. Focus first on the real problem to solve now, and keep your eyes open for other problems that exist or that may exist when a solution is applied.

Take a holistic view of the organization and apply inductive reasoning to the environment surrounding the stated problem to discover any other problems. By looking at the whole problem domain instead of only focusing on the immediate issue, the business analyst:

- Gets a wider view of the problem in context,
- Identifies ancillary problems and issues,
- Gets a better view of the impacts that may attend a given solution, and
- Is able to grasp different views of the problem and the conditions that cause the problem.

Principle 7 – Communicate, Cooperate, Collaborate

Keep communications flowing in all directions

Step out of the way of the communication and let it flow naturally. That is, let the solution team talk to the product stakeholders and vice versa. Only step in between to clarify, ameliorate, document (as in taking notes), facilitate (as in moving the discussion along), or mediate.

Do what is necessary to promote the flow of information amongst all parties of the solution. Do not, however, force reticent team members to communicate against their personality or coerce information from recalcitrant individuals.

Live on the Feedback

Organize your communication efforts around obtaining feedback from all parties. Keep announcements, status reports, and one-way communiqués to a minimum. When one of your communications does not receive feedback, consider that your communication failed and seek another way of transferring the information more successfully.

Checkpoints

There are a few checkpoint meetings that you want to hold formally or informally with one or more participants. The primary purpose of the checkpoints is to make sure the solution is moving in the right direction. The checkpoints are not status meetings or “this is what I have done” meetings”.

Problem Owner Confirmation

Perform a quick check of the defined problem statement with the problem owner to make sure the problem is correct and it is the problem that should be solved. At that time, you ask three questions:

- Is this the problem you want solved?
- What is your vision of the solution?
- What do you need to see to know we have solved the problem?

Checkpoint Alpha – Confirmation of Product Scope

This checkpoint is a preview of coming attractions for the solution team, assuming there is one assigned, and/or the product stakeholders. The purpose of the meeting is to validate the starting point for the solution life cycle and get an initial verification of product scope feasibility. The questions to be answered at this checkpoint are:

- Is this product scope feasible?
- Is there anything I missed?
- Does this make sense?

Checkpoint Beta – Confirmation of Good Requirements

The second meeting which could be informal or formal comes after the good requirements have been confirmed, when you have the solution to the problem that the process workers and/or customer agree to, and before you start the validation process of turning the solution into a formal set of requirements or solution document. The purpose is to technically confirm the solution and uncover any technical infeasibility, and to let the solution team know what is coming.

The questions you ask at this checkpoint are:

- Is there anything in the solution I missed?
- Does this solution make sense?
- Is it still feasible?
- Do you understand what the solution document is saying?

Checkpoint Charley – Review of Design

The third meeting, which is formal, is done after the technical team has defined a technical solution. The technical team presents its solution to the business analyst. The business analyst makes sure the solution still solves the business problem and updates the business solution to include any variations that result from the technical solution. The questions to be answered at this checkpoint are:

- How does the technical solution solve the business problem?
- Are there any technical changes that affect the solution document?
- What do I need to change in the solution document to keep the document synchronized with the solution?

Do not let documentation substitute for communication and collaboration

The requirements documentation should be the distillation or results of the process and all the communication that is part of the process. Confirmation activities should not be focused on getting the document approved, but on getting the solution correct. Approval will then follow naturally.

Principle 8 – The Business Analyst Owns the Solution Requirements

Once you have defined the solution and the business community has agreed that it solves their problem, you are the only one who has the authority to physically change the approved requirements. When you change them, the person(s) who signed the original document should also agree with, if not re-sign, with the changes made.

Requirements are written for those who create the solution not for those who have the problem

The final target audience for the requirements is the solution team. While the users or stakeholders need to agree that the requirements completely and accurately solve the problem, the requirements are written for those who are actually going to build the solution.

The solution document must match the delivered solution

Throughout the development process, there will be changes to the product. There will be trade-offs during systems analysis and design. There will be technical changes due to the build process. Testing may introduce changes. While the business analyst must evaluate all the changes in light of a valid solution to the problem, many changes will be acceptable or unavoidable. The business analyst's obligation is to modify the requirements to reflect the changed vision of the product.

The requirements state the solution to the business problem. The system delivered must do what the requirements say. The system delivered must solve the problem.

There is certainly a lot of discussion in the agile communities about the value of a formal set of requirements. There is no argument among the agilists about the value of a well maintained and documented code base. Business analysts derive the same benefit from documenting and maintaining complete requirements, as developers do from maintaining their code base.

Analyze, Analyze, Analyze

Your last name is “analyst” and everything you do is about analysis, from preparing decision papers for upper-level management to analyzing problem statements to determine what the real problem is. You do not accept anything as fact without analyzing to make sure it is fact. Your ability to analyze is what separates you from the requirements recorders.

Principle 9 – Gain Acceptance as well as Approval

Getting the solution document approved by the appropriate authorities on the business and solution sides is not enough for the business analyst. The solution document must be accepted by all. That means that the product stakeholders accept the changes that are going to be made to their environment, and the solution team understands and accepts the statement of solution and agrees that they can affect the solution.

Principle 10 – Make the Business Community Ready for the Product

You do not want to create a solution that nobody uses. The solution might be elegant and satisfy all requirements; however, when it is not used, it fails as a solution. The business analyst makes sure the product stakeholders, those affected by the problem and those impacted by the solution, have the requisite training and documentation, and are prepared for the change to their environment.

Principle 11 – Measure Twice, Cut Once

Measure the problem domain to establish the depth and breadth of the problem as part of our justification. Then implement the change. Once the problem is solved, perform the exact same measurement so that you can show the improvement.

Place the post implementation measurement into the product. In this way, you can continue to ensure the product continues to solve the problem and provide an indicator of future problems. It also establishes your first measurement the next time you change the system.

Measuring also provides a continuing justification and proof that the proposed changes are worthwhile and increases the trust that management has in you as a business analyst.