

In the media

Bridging the divide: solving the disconnect between IT and Business

By Glenda Wheeler. Director, Tharollo Consulting

This [article](#) first appeared on IT-Web, 9 April 2014

The BA must act as a bridge for two-way communication between IT and the business objectives it supports.

The primary role of a business analyst (BA) is to define a company's challenges and specify how best to resolve them using IT-based solutions. The BA must also be able to identify commercial opportunities and define how to leverage them with IT.

A secondary role is to manage change as the company implements projects to address its challenges and opportunities in the most efficient and effective manner.

For the BA, setting commercial objectives is typically a strategic function of business. Achieving the objectives is typically an IT function. Business decides, IT provides. In the middle sits the BA, acting as a bridge between business and project delivery.

The bridge is essentially a channel for two-way communication between IT and the business objectives it enhances and supports. The BA listens to business, interprets its needs and articulates them in a way that makes sense to IT. That process is then repeated as the BA reports IT's responses back to business. That's the theory.

Opposing sides

In reality, all too often, business doesn't describe the objectives it's targeting. This means IT doesn't have anything to aim for. Strategy is too closely held by senior execs and not shared sufficiently – if ever – with IT. Rather than explaining and discussing what needs to be achieved and why, business issues instructions – often without careful consideration of the implications.

This creates an environment where the expectation is that business loftily prescribes and IT merely complies. It's not exactly a formula for co-operative success in terms of making the organisation more efficient and more effective.

Poor or non-existent communication by business regarding its objectives is typically caused by an aversion to sharing information. Business strategies, plans, ideas and initiatives are treated in a proprietary, often secretive manner, and are jealously guarded instead of being openly shared with IT. This is problematic because inadequate communication is one of the key reasons why so many IT projects exceed their budgets and timeframes, fail to deliver all of the initially-specified functionality, or end up being cancelled altogether.

It also results in increasing polarisation, as the two functions – business and IT – seek to reinforce their authority within the company. Because modern IT has become so intricately woven into the fabric of so many companies, the function often regards itself as being the company. Of course, business rejects this assertion and reacts by treating IT as a tool that simply enables the crafting of a more successful organisation.

And, as everyone knows, bad workmen always blame their tools, and it is the blunt blade that wounds the most. Finger-pointing, back-covering, recriminations and intransigence become the order of the day. The divide between business and IT widens as the opposing camps become more entrenched in their respective laagers.

Meanwhile, in the background, business objectives and their associated IT-based projects repeatedly disintegrate at an alarmingly expensive rate. Business benefits are not realised as fast as possible. Costs escalate through unnecessary rework and increasing timelines. Responses to market pressures and opportunities are delayed and their eventual impact is either diluted or irrelevant.

Who's to blame?

The cause of the divide is by no means attributable solely to how (badly) business communicates with IT. The widespread perception within IT departments that they dominate the organisation does little to enamour them to business. The fact that IT appears to spend so much time and money maintaining the operational status quo lends weight to the argument that it's merely the tool and most definitely not the craftsman.

Hardly surprising then that requests from business are treated with such disdain. But far too often, business is rightly seen as a function that doesn't know what it wants, why it wants it, and continually changes its mind about what it most urgently must have.

And business certainly has little conception of what IT will have to do to put the ball between a pair of constantly shifting posts. It's like the old joke about Michelangelo's response to the Pope's brief for beautifying the Sistine Chapel: "You want what on the ceiling?!"

Translating discord into harmony

In order to be an effective bridge between business and IT, BAs have to act as translators. They have to understand the culture of both functions, and structure the communication between them in a way that is clear, concise and accurate. As a translator, they must facilitate a dialogue that serves both sides equally well.

For business, the BA must be able to accurately interpret and document in detail their challenges, needs and governing criteria. These must then be translated into a language that enables IT to clearly understand the purpose of the needs and the nature of the criteria. The more accurate the translation, the more empowered IT becomes to propose solutions that will best match the business need. The final step in this two-way communication is when the BA describes the solutions and their criteria to business in a rational and coherent fashion.

Unless companies deploy skilled and experienced BAs to initiate, guide and structure this dialogue, each side of the divide may feel it's winning, but it's always going to be a lose-lose battle.

Glenda Wheeler is a founding director of Tharollo Consulting. Her profound understanding of the real factors that cause project failure is complemented by a proven approach to ensuring project success.

Established in 1997, Tharollo's expertise lies in managing R40m - R300m initiatives and is backed by a track-record of 100% success in delivering projects on time and within budget.

Tharollo is a North Sotho word meaning, 'solution for a problem.'

Tharollo Consulting (Pty) Ltd www.tharollo.com
Glenda Wheeler 082 772 1581 glenda.wheeler@tharollo.com