

In the media

Where do business analysts belong?

In project management, what skills do analysts need and how must they contribute to assuring project success?

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A business analyst (BA) must be a major contributor in the management of IT-based projects that deliver all the required functionality, are completed on time, and within budget – a successful project. To do this, BAs need a range of skills that enable them to identify business challenges and opportunities, and then define effective ways to address them with efficient technology.

It's a sophisticated commercial role that requires an understanding of the business a company conducts, combined with a practical knowledge of technology and its optimal applications. Added to this rare combo, an effective BA must also be able to facilitate change as the organisation introduces initiatives that will reinforce its competitive strength and prosperity.

By correctly defining a BA's function in this way, it's clear the role is not only complex and demanding, it also highlights why skilled BAs play such an important role in the delivery of successful projects.

At the same time, such a definition explains why effective BAs are in such critically short supply. To put it bluntly, far too few BAs possess the experience-based trio of skills that span the disciplines of business, IT, and change management.

Skilled BAs facilitate better business decisions

Competent BAs empower business and IT to make the decisions that will ensure projects run according to time, budget and specification. They do this by using a variety of analytical tools to guide decision-making processes throughout a project's life cycle. They also recognise that using these tools in an appropriate manner enables a wide range of different decisions to be made in the journey from start to finish.

As in any journey, experienced BAs understand that deciding where to go is completely different from deciding how to get there. Buying a car in Jo'burg is pretty pointless when you need to get to Sydney...

What BAs do

Whether embarking on new projects or analysing status-quo performance, BAs themselves have to decide their approach to the project and identify what they must do to contribute to its success. Their first task is to pinpoint and classify the decision-making stakeholders and project sponsors, and establish communication with them.

For new initiatives, BAs then choose the right tools to accurately define what must be achieved, how it will be achieved, and how progress will be measured along the way. It's all about deciding what must be decided, by whom, and by when in order to drive the project forward to a successful completion.

From this point forward, new projects typically run to a formula, which begins with a process known as elicitation. The goal here is to ensure each stakeholder's real, practical and feasible requirements are clearly understood, documented and agreed. It's also about establishing if meeting these needs is within the organisation's capability.

This process of questioning and recording forms the roadmap for managing the project's scale and scope. It sets boundaries that minimise the risk of exceeding budgets and timeframes, and it holds the project to its functional promises.

As the project develops, maintaining the clarity of the roadmap is an ongoing, two-part process that is known in BA-speak as requirements analysis and requirements management. Requirements analysis deals with what the project must produce and how this may change as the project develops. This is complemented by the process of requirements management, which determines how adjustments and refinements are handled in a way that retains the requirements' integrity at a level that satisfies each stakeholder. It fosters a win-win environment across all the constituent parts of the project.

It's then the BA's task to identify solutions that will meet the requirements and to confirm they will in fact do so. This process is often referred to as solutions assessment and validation. In less 'jargonistic' terms, this really comes down to the old carpentry adage of measure twice, cut once – to minimise the risk of mistakes that waste materials, time and money.

Agents of change

Throughout all these differing but inter-related tasks, the BA needs to employ exceptional communication skills. In dialogue and through documentation, the BA continually motivates decisions by acting as a conduit or bridge for clear communication between all the elements within the project delivery team and its stakeholders.

To expedite these decisions, the BA must sit firmly within business and ensure the executive's strategy is clearly articulated and implemented accordingly. That's why they're called business analysts and not process analysts or technical analysts. Those are very different functions which should not be – but often are – confused with the BA's role.

By encouraging consensus, presenting innovative and practical solutions, explaining alternatives and defining their implications, the skilled BA must also manage the organisational change that is implicit in any project that seeks to advance business by delivering a competitive edge.

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.'

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