Analysts Anonymous

Informed Comment for the Business Analysis and Business Change Community

In this issue:

Creative Hiring, State of the BA Nation, Change Begins With Me, Are you a Business Analyst? and the Effective Computer

Spring 2016

ASSIST knowledge development
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Contents

Welcome 03

Creative Hiring 04

State of the BA Nation 08

Change Begins with Me 11

Are you a Business Analyst? 17

The Effective Computer 20

Welcome
from the editor

Evenings are already getting lighter and, much to everyone's relief, there are signs that warmer weather is on the way. Yes, it's spring. Which means a new edition of Analysts Anonymous.

This issue has a bit of a theme – the unique personality characteristics of BAs. One of our contributors suggests that when hiring we don't just check the candidates' professional and business abilities, we look at their personal skills too. Read the first feature to find out why.

Then there's a session from the BA Europe 2015 conference – although BAs talk a good talk, how do they react to change when it directly affects them? What do you think? The results of this study might surprise you.

And there's a fun quiz-type feature with a serious point – understanding the personality characteristics of a BA will help place them where they'll add most value to an organisation.

Think you know what's going on within your sector? We've listened in on industry conversations over the year to give you the top ten business analysis trends of the moment.

And finally, there's a look at The Effective Computer – a book written almost 40 years ago but still very relevant today. Have a read and decide how much of it you agree with.

Happy reading.

Anthony Madigan

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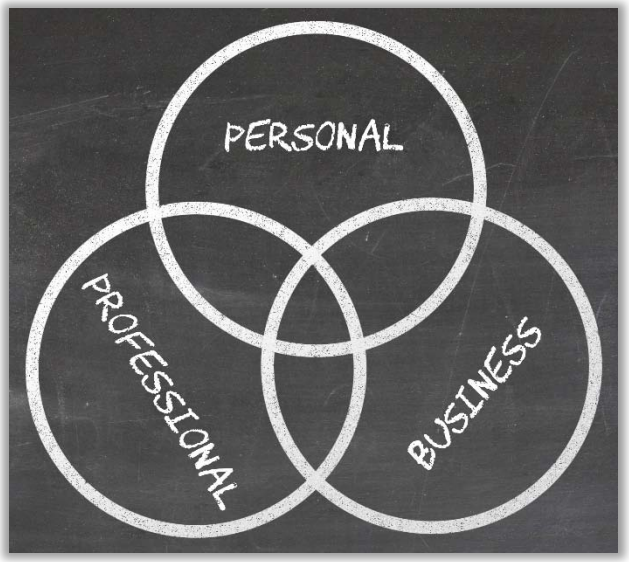
Creative Hiring and the Growing Importance of Personal Skills for BAs

Jo Solecki from Sheffield Hallam University and Lawrence Darvill from AssistKD explain why creative thinking is required during the hiring process



If you ask a group of BA practice leads about the relative importance of personal, professional and business skills you're likely to receive a wide range of (often strongly argued) responses.

Some Practice Leads will advocate 'business knowledge' as the most important consideration when it comes to hiring new business analysts. In their organisations, where BAs are expected to establish credibility by speaking the 'same language' as key stakeholders, an intimate knowledge of the business is considered to be of paramount importance.

Knowing the intricacies of a fixed income derivative can be make or break for a BA engaging with stakeholders in this field, although it's not much of a dinner table discussion point…

For some organisations, it is technical or application knowledge that takes precedent. Familiarity with a particular product may be such an advantage in delivering a technical solution that it's worth trading most other skills for.

For others, the BA toolkit or professional skill set is the constant focus for their recruiting efforts. After all, the toolkit gives the BA the means and

confidence to take ownership of the thorniest business problems. The toolkit is growing as BAs tap into other professions and acquire new techniques. A BA with an expanding and well-practised toolkit is an attractive proposition.

However, many practice leads will look you in the eye and argue all day about the overriding importance of personal skills. The ability to engage with people and the wherewithal to adapt to different and often challenging situations will always be required. And consider the argument that you can instil business knowledge and professional skills given a reasonable investment of time and energy. The same cannot always be said for personal skills development.

Of course why not hire candidates with a full set of skills? Well, very often you simply won't find the perfect skills mix and in these circumstances some creativity may be called for.

Sheffield Hallam University Case Study

The BA team at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) were facing an increasing range of change initiatives, and while there was a growing appreciation of the value of the BA role, too few resources were available to the head of practice.

With a go-ahead to hire, the immediate focus fell on securing the right candidates in a highly competitive local market. The university can, however, boast involvement in substantial change, a central role in continuous improvement, a healthy working environment and flexible working hours.

It's worth noting that the roles were a mixture of entry-level and more senior BAs. The expectation for the entry-level role was that candidates could be identified with some past work experience (not necessarily as a BA) and an aptitude for the BA role. Clearly the search would focus on identifying a depth of personal skills.

Interestingly, the team looked first to internal sources for attracting applicants for the entry level role, as it was recognised that internal candidates would bring with them knowledge of university practices, an immediate benefit to the team. For example: HR colleagues had been engaged in a systems and process improvement project and had some

exposure to the BA discipline. These candidates had some knowledge of the University and had impressed with their personal effectiveness.

External adverts were placed but were limited to the university sector. The consensus was that there is so much general interest in working at the university that this level of exposure would generate sufficient applications without incurring the costs associated with wider external advertising.

For both roles, the selection process focused first and foremost on how candidates interacted with the interviewing panel. Candidates were then asked to complete a scenario-based exercise that would assess their thought processes around a business problem and test some basic process mapping and data modelling skills. Candidates were also asked to prepare a short presentation ahead of the interview. Attribute-based questions were also used.

It was, in the end, a very practical assessment of the candidates' ability to engage with people and complete some basic BA activities.

Given the circumstances, the results from this approach have been exceptional. Successful applicants are flying high at SHU or have gone on to bigger roles. One former SHU employee — Georgiana Mannion – has gone on to launch her own consultancy company (Process in Colour) and speaks regularly at the BA Conference Europe. The university accepts that their roles may well be a stepping stone on an individual's career ladder and that people may leave after a few years' service. Exposure to change across their operations and the ownership of continuous improvement provide an excellent grounding for more senior BA roles in other industries.

Rather than lessons learned here, it is more about lessons reinforced. The focus for SHU will always be on personal interaction rather than CV content. It is a focus that has served them well.

Summary – a leap of faith or quantum leap?

Whilst the SHU approach is dictated partly by circumstances, their approach could be seen as being ahead of the curve.

Research relating to the Expert BA Award (recognising BAs in full flight) shows that personal skills are given the highest weighting in terms of

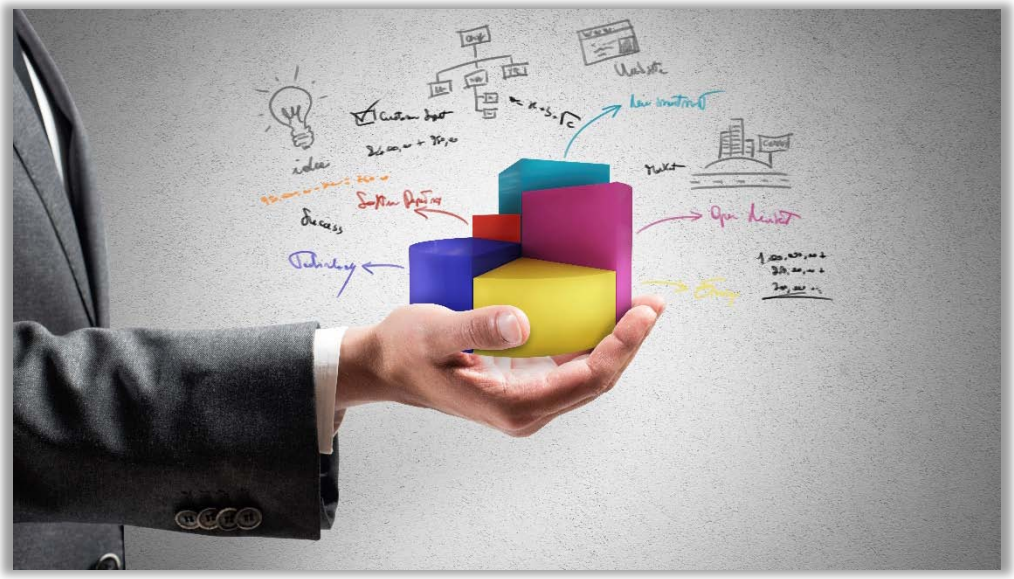
importance, by a ratio of 2:1. As scope and authority increase in the BA role, we are seeing a skills shift with the emphasis very much on personal skills. This begs the question, why not always focus on this area in the earlier stages of engagement and career development?

I was once reprimanded by a respected trainer for my repeated use of the phrase ‘soft skills’. He preferred the term ‘personal effectiveness’ and had an unshakeable confidence in individuals achieving great things in their careers through the development of how they communicate, influence, negotiate with and present to colleagues, above all other skills.

Looking ahead, SHU could therefore be developing the BA stars of the future.

State of the BA Nation

Industry beans spilled by The Business Alchemist



Over a year, AssistKD training consultants talk to hundreds, if not thousands, of BAs. Whether at the BA Conference or the BA Manager Forum or any other seminar, the conversation is usually buzzing with new ideas and experiences. So, we thought it would be interesting to list the top ten business analysis trends we've observed and discussed over the last year. See what you think – agree or disagree?

1. The complete business analysis career

Business analysis has evolved into a career. As a result, BAs can be found working at all levels from entry to consulting, and have the opportunity to move sideways as well as upwards because of the many areas to specialise in. Established BAs might want to take a closer look at the BCS International Advanced Diploma in Business Analysis* and entry level BAs have the promise of a new dedicated apprenticeship scheme this year**.

2. Personal effectiveness

The emphasis on developing personal skills continues, in particular for established BAs.

3. Benefit realisation

Increasingly, BAs are staying with projects during the post-implementation period. They're helping to ensure that the business benefits are delivered and that remedial action is taken where this isn't the case.

4. Leadership

More and more BAs are taking on leadership roles. Not always for management responsibilities but more often because they're role models or are mentoring more junior BAs. A recent McKinsey article highlights the following core areas as being key to effective leadership: solving problems effectively, operating with strong results orientation, seeking different perspectives and supporting others – all within the remit of the established BA***

5. The Agile BA

There is an increasing recognition of the importance of business analysis in Agile development projects. However, the role of business analysis in ensuring that projects 'do the right things' (which sometimes means using technology wisely), is also becoming more recognised. Is business analysis the most Agile of the IS disciplines? Discuss!

6. Data analysis

Data is everywhere with newer roles such as Information Analyst and Data Scientist coming to the fore. Business analysts are increasingly being expected to understand the business data and the rules that are inherent in the data organisation and formats.

7. Customer value

While value can only be determined by the customers receiving the BA service, the need to ensure that customer requirements are understood, challenged where necessary and form the basis for proposed solutions, continues to place significant responsibility on business analysts.

8. The expanding BA toolkit

Surely business analysis has the most extensive toolkit of all IS professions. Yet, it continues to develop with more and more new techniques being used for BA work.

9. Business architecture

Whether supporting the development of business architecture, ensuring that any solution aligns with it, or clarifying where a solution will impact upon it, BAs offer key skills and techniques that inform and support the definition of a business architecture.

10. BA practice development

As the BA role has developed into a career, there's a greater need for the BA community within organisations to develop in maturity. This has led an increasing number of organisations to set up a BA practice under the governance of a BA Practice Manager.

* An overview of the Advanced Diploma scheme is available here.
** The Trailblazer Apprenticeship scheme is outlined here.
*** Decoding Leadership: What really matters is available here.

The Business Alchemist is AssistKD's resident expert on business analysis topics and writes a regular blog. Visit www.assistkd.com to read further posts and add your comments.

Change Begins with Me

BA Europe 2015 – Conference session delivered by Christina Lovelock and Kathryn Pow

Setting the Scene

Christina Lovelock and Kathryn Pow, from The Health and Social Care Information Centre, investigate the BA's attitude to change

Business analysts at The Health and Social Care Information Centre usually work on projects that are NHS-facing, implementing new national systems and reports used by health and care staff.

Over the past year, some of the team have been involved in projects relating to internal organisational change.

The change projects being implemented will be familiar to many organisations: implementing a 'resource pool' model for a more flexible work force, adopting standard job descriptions to simplify and streamline recruitment, and the introduction of a time-recording system to provide clear information about what people are working on.

The BAs involved in the projects would be personally affected by the changes being introduced. This seemed like a rare opportunity to understand the BA attitude to change.

The Hypothesis

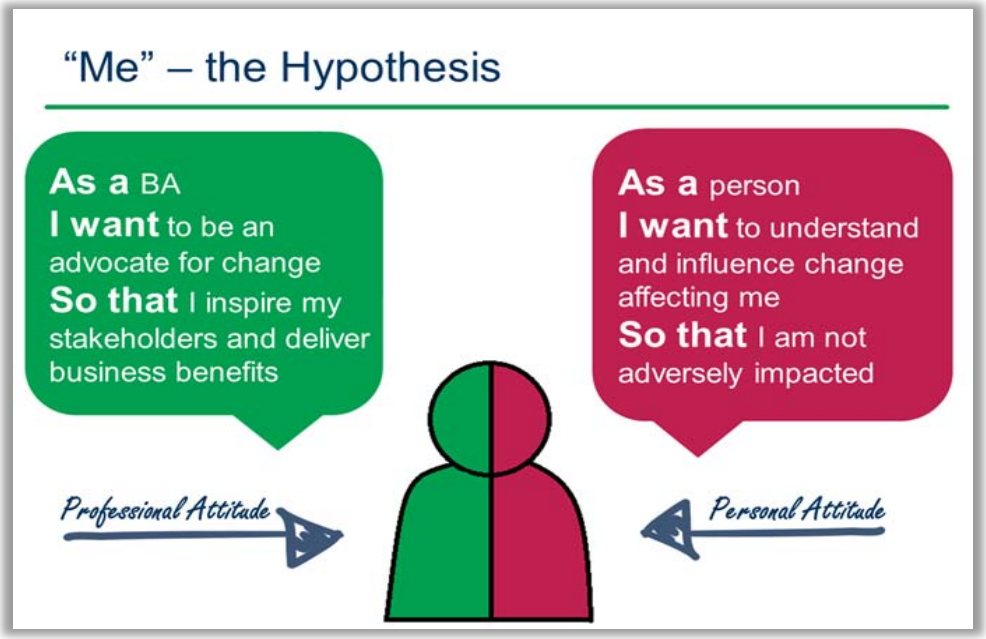
All the change work we were doing led us to develop a theory. Well, it turned into a theory but starts as a query:

"As BAs, we talk a good talk when it comes to embracing change and being change agents, but is this positive attitude affected when the change actually affects us?"

So what happens when the BA is affected by change? Our hypothesis was

that we would revert to standard human behaviour. You are probably used to the concept of *Professional Opinion,* which may or may not be the same as *Personal Opinion*. We speculated that as well as *Professional Attitude* there is also a concept of *Personal Attitude.*

So we wanted to test out this theory, but we realised that to get to the real answer we would have to do something a bit more subtle than just asking the question directly.



Investigation

We wanted to have both qualitative and quantitative data, so we took two approaches to testing our hypothesis – wide surveys and narrow-focused workshops.

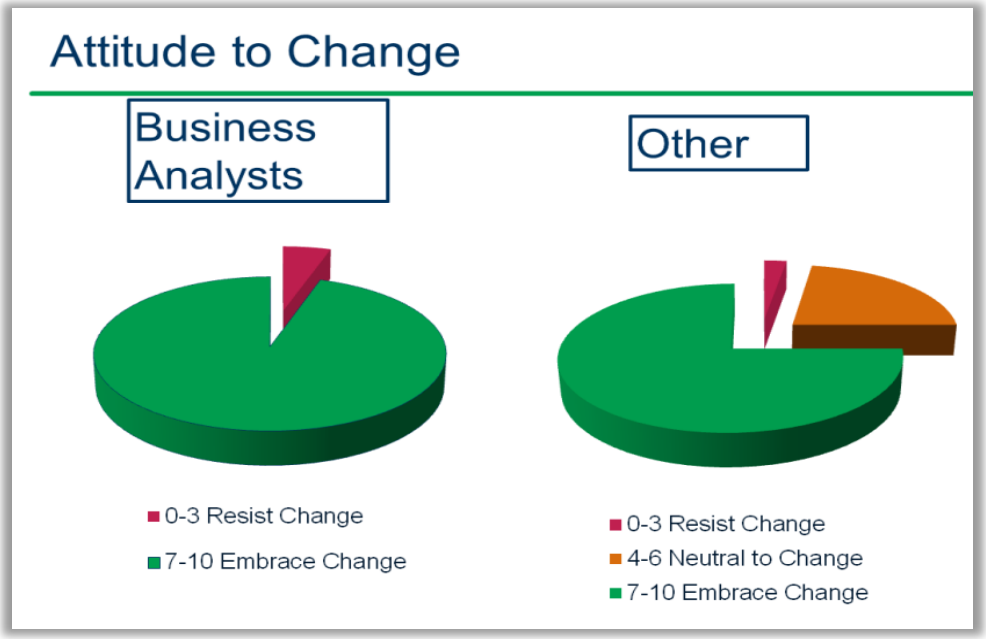
Wide-baselining across the organisation

We put out a two-part survey to our whole organisation, initially asking people to consider their attitude to change on a scale of 0 to 10 (with 0 being 'highly resistant' and 10 being 'embrace the change') and factors which influence their attitude. We used Survey Monkey, and the survey was open for 2 weeks. At this point we didn't make any reference to the survey in connection with these projects or that we would be benchmarking the BA attitude against a control group of all 'Other' respondents.

We were really pleased to get 140 responses across several professional groups.

Figures from the survey showed that 95% of BAs felt they 'embrace change' compared with 75% of all other respondents.

This confirmed and supported the first part of our hypothesis, that BAs in general have a more positive attitude to change.



Narrow-focus workshops with BAs

Several members of the team had been involved in one of the change projects, so we invited them to a workshop. We didn't reveal our hypothesis initially – we just wanted to find out if their attitudes and actions as BAs were affected if change affected them directly.

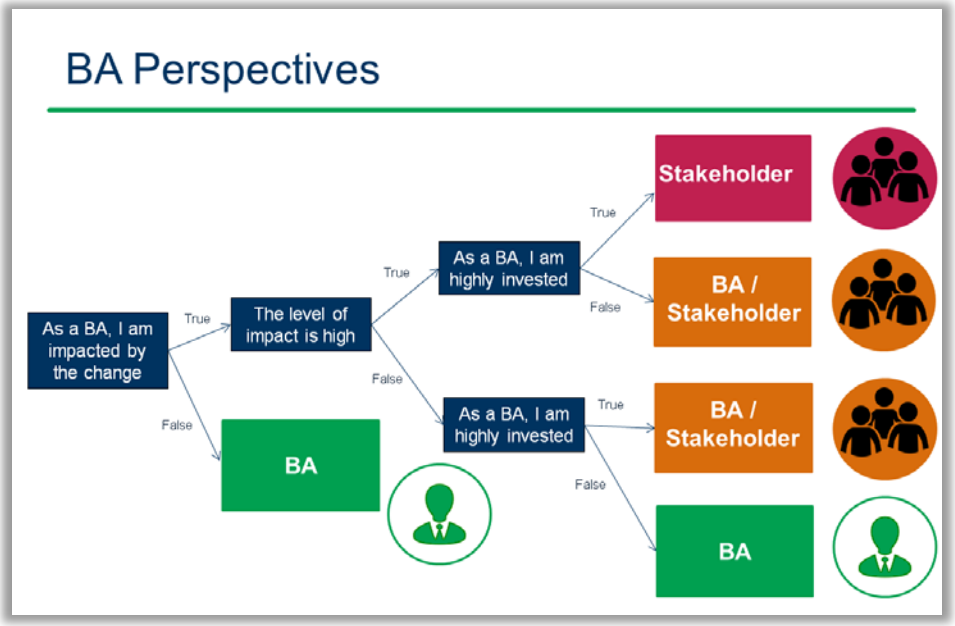
We asked them about consciously bringing their own opinions into workshops or trying to influence stakeholders, and we found them to be quite open about the fact that it is sometimes difficult to set aside one's own opinions. We did some mind-mapping and found that whether behaviour was influenced came down to three areas:

- if the BA was affected
- the level of impact
- the level of personal investment or interest.

If the BA is not affected by the change they behave in the neutral, unbiased manner that you would typically expect of a BA.

If they are affected, we need to assess the level of impact and the level of personal investment.

If both the level of impact and level of investment is low, again we would expect them to behave as a typical BA.



However, if the level of impact and level of investment is high, it is nearly impossible for them to behave in a fully neutral and unbiased manner towards the change. They act more like stakeholders.

This leaves us with the middle ground where either the level of impact or the level of investment is high, in which case the BA is usually able to wear both hats and can consciously distinguish between the two roles that they are playing.

We discussed this with our team and realised that we are all patients of the NHS and all taxpayers. Therefore we often operate in this middle ground, taking a BA perspective but also stepping outside the project and considering the value to the taxpayer and implications for patients.

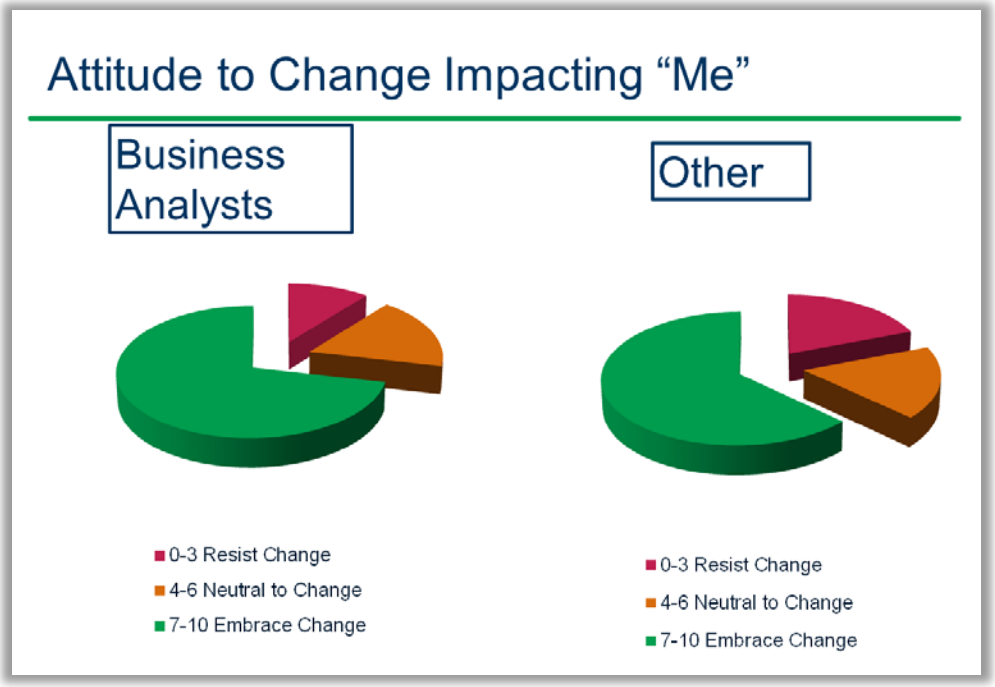
Wide-validating

A few weeks later we ran the second part of our survey to see if the findings

from the team were supported by the data.

We used a similar approach to the first survey, and this time we were extremely pleased to get over 170 responses

Instead of asking generally about attitude, we asked specifically about attitude to the changes being introduced by the internal change projects.



Now that the BAs were being asked about a change that affects them, we found that there was no longer a significant difference between the BAs attitude to this change and the attitude of the other professions.

In fact, the proportion of BAs feeling they could embrace this change dropped from 95% to only 71%, very similar to the 69% of the other professions.

Comparing the results of the surveys confirmed what we suspected – that it is very easy for BAs to be positive about changes to other people, but when WE are affected we often behave just like any other stakeholder group.

Conclusion

What can we learn from this work?

Firstly – that as BAs we do consider ourselves to be advocates for change – but perhaps we should stop and think about how we would feel if the changes we are implementing (such as new IT systems or changed processes) were actually going to affect *our* working day. Can we show more empathy with those stakeholders affected by the change we are working on and see them as people trying to come to terms with it?

Secondly – we also need to be aware that BAs are often very invested in their work and can appear not quite so neutral, acting suspiciously like stakeholders rather than BAs.

So the challenge for you is to think about your own attitude to change – not just your professional attitude to the general concept of change, but your *personal attitude* to a real change which has affected you. Can you bring together that professional attitude ("I'm a BA and embrace change") and your personal attitude to its impact?

Pop Quiz: Are you a business analyst?

David Beckham, from Aviva, says he can tell

Have a think about the statements below. They might indicate that you have the potential to be, or already are, a business analyst.

- The wording on the sign below makes your brain itch

- You're curious about the braille signs in lifts because you want to understand how blind people know where they are.
- You work out how many sets of traffic lights there are on a particular journey so you can compare it with an alternative route.
- You admire Sherlock Holmes.
- You moan about road junctions that don't have the traffic lights timed to avoid traffic coming from the right and blocking the junction when your lights go green.
- You think the scene in Apollo 13 where they make the disparate oxygen scrubbers fit is the best example of business process re-engineering (or Agile, depending on your age) that you've ever seen.
- You find yourself saying "Why would anyone want to do it that way?" often.
- You are an innate people-watcher.
- Your view of life in general is outcome-focused and you analyse things as a process.

This might seem a little frivolous so far. But it's attempting to make a serious point – most Business Analysts share certain characteristics. BAs are usually inquisitive, collaborative, self-motivating and outcome-oriented. They thrive in ambiguous situations and enjoy the challenge of solving a

business problem. They tend not to be detail-driven and are focused on quality of delivery rather than cost or time. In general they are self-motivated and, while comfortable in groups, tend to work alone. It's easy to argue that not everyone has the personality traits to take on the role.

So, why does this matter? It matters because someone with the right personality, predisposed to the right skills, will add the right type of value to the organisation. Current industry trends lean toward Agile scrum or Kanban-style delivery, and it helps to understand the essence of a BA to be able to best place them.

The question is, where do we see BAs working best in IT organisations? Do they operate in a consultative, shaping capacity or do they end up working through endless lists of user stories? Does the current call for Agile-style development leave the BA in an advantageous place or not? One of the factors that determines those answers is the scale of the organisation. In a smaller organisation, a BA can thrive and excel in facilitating the vision and developing a great business outcome through questioning and challenging. In larger organisations, the BA seems to end up in a silo of 'user story shepherd' or, more flippantly, a 'JIRA jockey'.

Another factor to consider is the sponsorship of the BA role within an organisation; if it has senior IT managers who used to be BAs then the support is likely to be good. But if the senior IT management cut their teeth in architecture, solution design or project management, the BA may be seen less favourably. Unfortunately the role is still a relative newcomer within IT organisations and, often, the senior management view is yet to evolve.

The final factor in recognising the business analyst's value is the perceived vagueness around the role. It's still difficult to encapsulate the role in the classic 'elevator conversation' or while having a chat at parties:

"Oh... you're in IT?"

"Well, yes… and no actually…"

"So you design computer systems?"

"Er… no. I kind of find out what people want a system to do… but it's not all

about IT systems, it's about people as well…"

"You're not one of those types who get people fired for efficiency reasons then?"

"No… although that sometimes happens"

"I think I see someone I know at the bar… excuse me"

Or the classic response – *"Ohhhhh… you run meetings…"*

I've now got to the stage where I poke fun at the situation and myself with a wittier answer:

"I'm a specialist in generalism"

"I get paid to ask stupid questions – and I'm very good at it"

"I help people to understand what they really need instead of what they think they really want"

"I break things then help fix them"

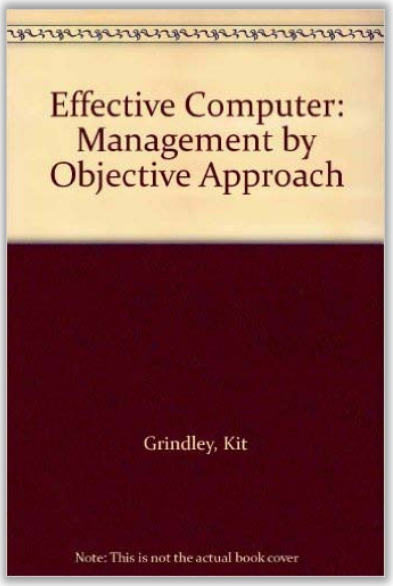
"I surf the wave of ambiguity"

All of these statements are relevant to the BA role but not one of them is an accurate or comprehensive description. Most books on the subject would agree that, in general terms, a business analyst is someone who provokes and facilitates change within organisations in a structured and effective way. And this process may involve IT or organisational change across the organisation.

In short, it's a **lot** more complicated than running meetings. Perhaps it's time to tell the world that!

The Effective Computer

A wise way to spend a penny, by Steve Skidmore



I recently received an Amazon voucher for £25. And, while browsing the site for bargains, I came across The Effective Computer by Kit Grindley and John Humble. Available used, in hardback, from 1p (plus post and packing) to £31.99 (plus post and packing).

I still have my hardback copy of the book, bought when I was a part-time student on the MSc in Information Systems at London School of Economics in 1978. Kit was one of our lecturers, although I suspect that he was still a part time lecturer back then, working mainly as a consultant in industry. I remember one lecture where he arrived but his briefcase didn't, it had been left in the taxi bringing him to the university. This seemed so exotic at the time – a taxi from some undoubted high-flying consultancy assignment to the university to lecture a small group of students.

So, out of curiosity, I dusted off my copy of The Effective Computer. Its focus on business and business objectives was really quite radical at the time. It tried to establish the computer as an enabler of business success, giving it a central strategic role in the business, rather than as a reducer of overheads. In the preface, the book states that technical objectives *per se* are not worth pursuing. "The only valid objective for computers is to assist in achieving defined business improvements which would be impossible or uneconomical without the computer." Astonishingly, the book was published in 1973, so must have been written in 1971/2. This was the year I wrote my first FORTRAN program on paper tape and submitted it to the university's computer department for processing. Six days later the output came back with my first syntax error. It was also a time before office automation, with secretaries and typists, shorthand and dictation. Kit Grindley's prophesy of the future expansion of computing (although he only permits himself to estimate up to 1980!) and his understanding of the role of the computer was, in retrospect, truly visionary.

The Effective Computer had six fundamental stages, although one of these, training, was seen as central to the whole approach. I thought I would focus on the first three stages and invite you to think about their continued relevance.

The first stage was key area analysis. This stage was concerned with identifying the really important activities of the company. “There are usually five or six areas which are critical to the organisation’s success. If we are seeking to make a business improvement, let us concentrate in the few areas that really influence profits.” The emphasis here is on the business. What is our purpose? What are we in business for? What is the present situation of the firm? What are the strengths and weaknesses of our firm at the moment? What are the opportunities and what are the threats that face us? Importantly, there was no mention of computers!

Stage two was concerned with analysing the control constraints on objectives. Only in this second stage is the computer’s possible contribution to the achievements of the line department of the business – the makers and sellers – considered. “Essentially, the approach is to identify some major objectives for a line department in one of the key areas which cannot be achieved without the help of a computer system. Clearly if we can identify such a contribution from automation then the computer is placed at the forefront of the business, it has a strategic role.” However, despite this role the authors make an important point, often lost in subsequent years. Only the user can achieve business benefits. The system’s objective represents the computer’s contribution to the achievement of the business objective. Alone, the computer department can only produce computer systems, not business improvements.

The third stage checks the appropriateness of automation. The approach so far has identified potential areas for automation. These areas should not be adopted without making sure that, in helping the business to achieve its objectives, automation will not at the same time cause performance problems in some other areas. The authors give seven examples. All still seem relevant today:

- An apparent illogicality, duplication or irrelevancy is, in fact, propping up the system.

- A decision based on human judgement or local knowledge may be preferable to an automated optimised or logical system.

- The automation of work unacceptable to human beings may create similar work in another area.

- Automation may remove a necessary human contact.

- Although rules are laid down, it may be the bending of those rules by human beings that makes the system work.

- The inflexibility of an automated system may hinder the business's adaptation to changing requirements.

- An automated system may destroy the motivation of the humans who remain involved with it.

Stage Four required the construction of a cost-benefit analysis, including intangible benefits. Importantly, it suggested starting with the benefits and costing the total plan for achieving those benefits, not just considering the costs associated with information technology. Stage Five was concerned with implementing the system. In this stage the systems are designed in detail and computer programs are written. So, quite a big stage!

Dame Stephanie Shirley (Steve Shirley) was a prominent IT figure in the 1970s and 1980s. She founded a company called FI that was later known as Xansa and is now part of the Sopra Steria Group. However, despite her later success, her autobiography 'Let IT Go' recounts a time when her company was small and an expanding workload caused a serious cash flow problem: "We were being paid to do more and bigger projects and although each project was in itself profitable, we never seemed to have

enough money in the bank. Sensing that something was wrong, I decided to invest in some expert advice and asked the consultants of Urwick Debold if they could help." They sent out a consultant who had liaised with her on a previous project.

"The consultant looked through the books and was simultaneously impressed and horrified. I was, he explained, on the point of having to close the business down."

However, the consultant could see that the business was fundamentally sound: "There was clearly a market for what we did and our long-term future looked astonishingly bright. So, he got out his personal cheque book and, there and then, wrote a cheque for £500 to tide us through. It was an act of generosity that I have never forgotten. The loan was rapidly paid back and the cottage industry that he saved went on to become a multinational giant. But without that timely loan all our potential and inherent strengths would have come to nothing."

The name of the consultant? Kit Grindley. What a star! So, grab his book while it is still available. Worth 1p (plus post and packing) of anybody's money!