

Business Analyst

Introduction

Developing a totally new IT system, or even modifying an existing one, is a major undertaking for any organisation. The demand for new hardware, new software, and infrastructure change; in fact any key adjustments to a company's IT make-up, is usually initiated by the people from the business. In other words the end users of that IT system. Such changes to an IT system can cost anywhere from tens of thousands of pounds, to tens of millions. If executed incorrectly or unnecessarily, this becomes a very costly mistake indeed.

Whenever such a new system request is made, the IT Director or CIO is usually the person charged with the decision of whether or not to proceed. But they need someone to find out the reality of things on their behalf in an objective and calm manner, and someone who can **translate the user's needs** into a process which IT can start to work with.

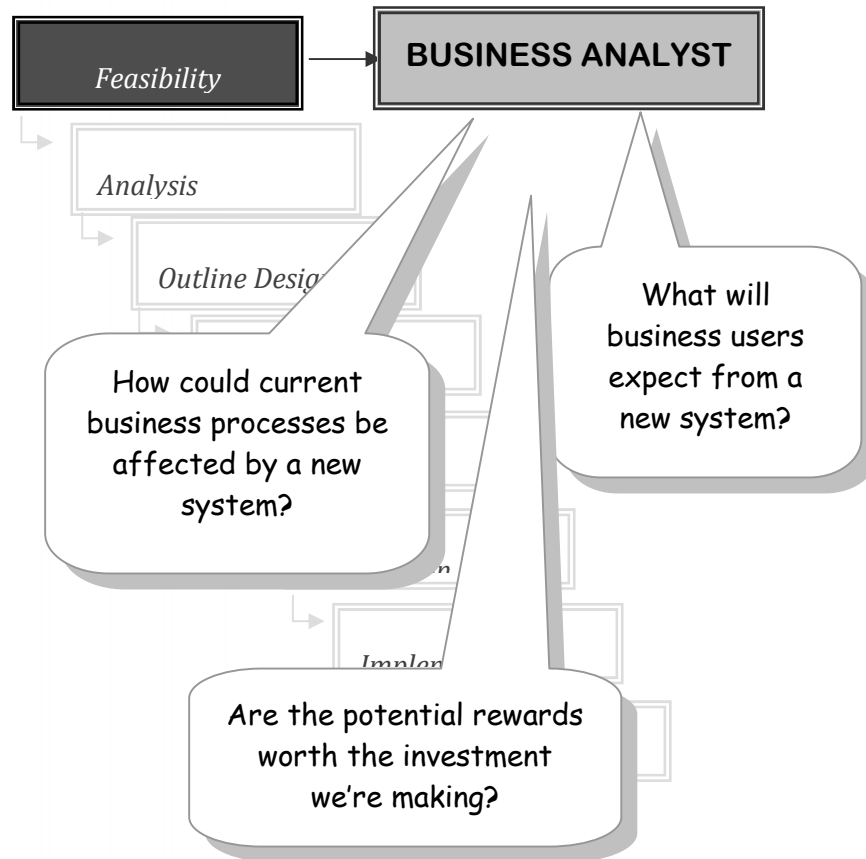
So when we're thinking about initiating change in IT, when we need to potentially remedy the flaws in our existing set-up; the very first person we bring on board is the **Business Analyst**.

When do we need a Business Analyst?

It's a common misconception that BA's are needed only when completely new IT innovations are called for. The truth is that in today's ever-expanding corporate environment even the tiniest addition or modification to the IT system can have far-reaching strategic business implications. For this reason BA's are brought on board when almost any level of change is required. For this reason most 'Change Manager' requirements are easily filled by experienced BA's.

The Analyst Role in Detail

The diagram below shows the first stage in the project lifecycle a BA makes an appearance, and the type of questions which they need answers to.



Key Responsibilities of a Business Analyst

Evolution in IT is an expensive business. That's why a BA is sent in to make sure that this new and expensive IT system is actually going to be worth the headache in the long run.

- The Instigator of Change
- The Objective Opinion
- The Insurance Policy

Key Skills and Characteristics

Below are some of the principle attributes we would normally associate with a good business/systems/analyst.

- Excellent communication and technical skills both written and oral.
- The ability to systematically collate and evaluate data and then make well-reasoned rational recommendations.
- A solid grasp of key areas of technology.
- An appreciation of the current IT landscape and the in-vogue technologies that could be implemented as a possible solution.
- The ability to conceptualise and recommend a potential solution.
- The ability to translate the users' needs.
- The ability to gather user requirements and collect Information by adopting key methods such as
 - 1) Asking questions directly to the users.
 - 2) Observational studies.
 - 3) Dry prototyping.
 - 4) Formal sessions such as workshops, user interviews.

What Happens When a BA gets involved in a Feasibility Study

Overview

A feasibility study is conducted to justify potential change and check the viability of the proposed remodelling of the business.

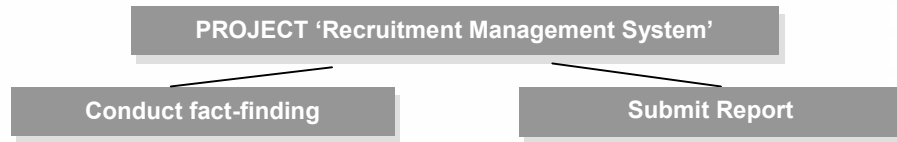
Defining the Project Scope

The process of producing a clear statement regarding the current business environment, and the context of the new project in relation to it, is known as the Project Scope. Within this document, there are far more emphasis on project planning, estimating and scheduling; enough to give clear indications regarding time and cost projections for the project.

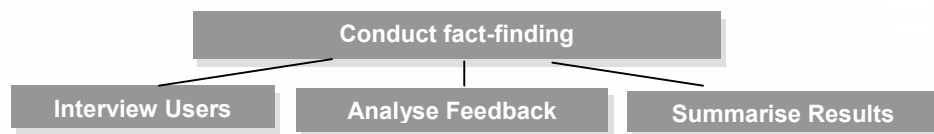
Allocating Work Packages with WBS

This feasibility stage of the project starts to define the workload that may be involved in the project, and even begins the process of breaking down the workload into smaller manageable units of work, the technique is often referred to as a **Work Breakdown Structure (WBS)**.

The basic idea of a WBS is simply to break a large body of work into smaller and smaller, less daunting, tasks. For example,



Further broken down into logical sub-divisions



The Deliverables of a Feasibility Study

The Resulting Documentation

The resulting documentation from the Feasibility stage will generally include:

- An Executive Summary containing strategic plans and goals.
- The sources of information (users, people who attended workshops etc.) including organisational structures, and business units.
- A clear description of the current system, with a business problem and opportunity statement.
- Organisational charts and financial metrics.
- Statistical information relating to all findings.
- Potential Technology Impact Analysis (PTIA).

Concepts and Technologies Associated with this Role

- Business Process Reengineering (BPR).
- Change Management.
- Prototyping.
- Key Stakeholders.
- Data Flow Diagrams (or Data Modelling).
- Computer Aided Software Engineering (CASE).
- Unified Modelling Language (UML).
- Entity Relationship Diagram (ERD). Also known as an Entity Relationship Model (ERM) or Logical Data Structure (LDS).

Interviewing Business and Systems Analysts

The following are good items of conversation to start sorting out the strong from the weak:

- Ask about their overall experience with BPR and change management in their previous roles.
- What experience have they had of data modelling and what was their preferred approach for this?
- Where in their CVs do they make reference to their experience with CASE tools?
- Have they ever had to recommend that a project does not proceed?
- Ask them to describe their experience in facilitating user workshops.
- What was their experience of using prototyping approaches during the feasibility stage?

On the whole Business Analysts should come across as 'mini project managers', excellent team leaders, proficient data modellers, and effective communicators.