The Creative Business Analyst
Part 1 - Understanding Problems

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Overview

Many of us are familiar with the process of business analysis – start by gathering requirements from stakeholders then turn them into a specification which developers can understand. These days however, we need to do more than just document the requirements.

We need to work with stakeholders and business users to understand their systems and analyse their problems – *why do you do it this way, why not that way*? This is the real value-add that the analyst brings to the table. It means challenging the status quo, pushing the boundaries, looking for alternative or creative solutions.

To develop a solution - unless we're very lucky - we first need to understand the problem that drives the need. In this paper we'll look at how to understand and define business problems – part 2 will look at how to generate solution ideas and part 3 will cover how to choose the best ones.

This series of papers is based on the IRM workshop "Analysing & Solving Problems" and the presentation "The Creative Business Analyst" delivered at the Business Analyst World 2008 conferences in Melbourne and Sydney.

Business problems and the business analyst

Problems don't just happen – the Oxford Dictionary defines a problem as:

"an unwelcome or harmful matter needing to be dealt with… a thing that is difficult to achieve"

In both commercial and government organisations, these sorts of problems occur every day. Some examples:

"Our competitors let their customers track orders online…"
"We want to offer online check-in via mobile phones…"
"Do we need to change any business processes for the next application release…"
"What system changes are needed for the new tax tables…"
"What database access is required for compliance reporting…"
"How can we prevent under/over payment of benefits…"

Each of these are common business problems which may require changes to systems – and with IT now integral to most business processes, the analyst will nearly always be involved. When dealing with business users, nothing earns their respect more than when you understand their problems.

Problems need boundaries

The more precise our definition of a problem, the more likely we are to find the optimum solution. Problems can make people emotive and words such as *better – faster – cheaper* are subjective. We need to quantify them, to put measurements on them. For example:

Better service – reduce average call centre waiting time from 40 seconds to 20 seconds
Faster delivery – increase same day shipments from 70% to 90%
Cheaper product – reduce sales process costs by 20%

We also need to be clear on what is in scope and what is out of scope. Reducing sales process costs means we shouldn't get side-tracked into examining delivery costs (but if you spot something in another area that could be improved make sure you note it down!!)

Many people benefit from using a problem description form to help them with their thought processes. The following example is from an insurance company experiencing a drop in policy renewals.

Problem Description Form
Problem Name
Policy Renewal Problem
Description
Policy renewals down in past 6 months
Location
Melbourne
First Detection (Date / Time)
1st July 2008
Impact Assessment
Down 35% on corresponding period last year
Owner
Melbourne Sales Manager
Complainants
Regional Manager
Victims
Company sales targets

This example gives us a picture of problem and its scope – what the problem is and what it is not.

Understanding problems

It's one thing to describe a problem – the user is very good at this, we're just helping them be precise – but the real challenge is to understand it and find a solution.

In the policy renewals example we've been told that renewals are down, but why? We could take a guess – more people are self insuring, disposable income is down, a cheaper competitor has moved in – but unless we establish the facts, our understanding will remain as guesswork. As we haven't got time to become an expert in policy renewals we need some techniques or methods for analysing problems.

Most people will be familiar with root cause (top down) analysis but many others exist, including:

- Critical examination (bottom up analysis)
- Structured questioning
- Ishikawa fishbone (a variation of root cause analysis)
- Essential modelling

and many more. In each case we're taking a detailed look at the problem, going beyond our superficial understanding and immersing ourselves in the problem.

That eureka moment

How many times have you been bogged down in a problem only to have a flash of inspiration – of insight – which crystallizes your understanding. Whilst we may know every detail of a problem, we often have to look at it differently before we can truly understand it.

Looking at things differently, changing our perspective, goes to the heart of problem analysis. It's not for nothing that expressions such as *think outside the square* and *change your point of view* are part of everyday language. Perspective is closely linked with the subconscious and it's bringing the subconscious to the surface which will often give us our eureka moment.

Tapping into the subconscious

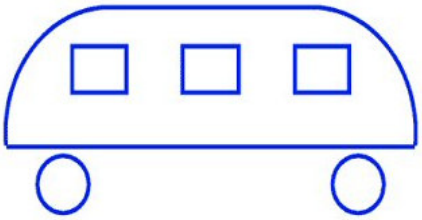
For most of us, our waking hours are filled with conscious thoughts and we get immersed in what we're doing. The internal dialogue running around inside our head gives no time for the subconscious to emerge. What we need is a way of giving the subconscious an opportunity to work on the problem.

Outside the workplace, all manner of diversions can be used, from relaxation, sport and entertainment through to sitting on the proverbial mountain top. At work our choices are more limited and we may just need to park the problem and let our subconscious chip away at it in background mode. Don't underestimate the power of parking (incubating) problems. It's a technique recommended in many formal problem solving methodologies and sometimes just engaging your mind in other activities will free up the subconscious to do a bit of background processing.

A child's perspective

Children will often see things in a totally different way to adults and there are lessons to be learnt from the way their interpretation of situations differs markedly from ours. At a recent conference, I asked the audience:

1) *Who thinks the bus is going left to right?*
2) *Who thinks it's going right to left?*
3) *Who thinks there's not enough information?*



Most of the audience (and me when I first saw this) said there wasn't enough information to make a decision.

However when primary school children were asked the same question, 90% said – *the bus is going left to right.* When asked why, most of them said – *because you can't see the door.*

Note that if we lived in a country where people drive on the right then the bus would be going right to left (assuming it's not reversing).

The reason many of us couldn't get the answer to this puzzle was that we accepted the information at face value. When told this was a drawing of a bus, we accepted this statement. Children more likely said to themselves – *that's not a very good drawing of a bus – where's the door?* They were already half way to solving the puzzle just by questioning the base data. In projects how many times do we miss the obvious by making the same mistake?

Real problems can be solved by ordinary people

There's often a belief that only "smart" people can solve problems or that you need a heavy duty methodology before you can tackle them. Nothing could be further from the truth. We all have to tackle business problems every day. In fact when we start calling them issues, our day is full of them. Think back to the list of scenarios at the beginning of this paper:

"Our competitors let their customers track orders online…"
"We want to offer online check-in via mobile phones…"
"Do we need to change any business processes for the next application release..."
"What system changes are needed for the new tax tables…"
"What database access is required for compliance reporting…"
"How can we prevent under/over payment of benefits…"

Don't we have to deal with these sorts of things everyday? In fact the life of a business analyst would be pretty dull if we didn't have "issues" filling our day. Let's face it our job is to help the organisation be more effective and more efficient. What we do is provide our business users with another perspective – an outsider looking in will often see things that insiders miss.

Whilst some problems are more complicated than others, nearly all are solvable. Business and society would have ground to a halt a long time ago if this wasn't the case. We just need to keep plugging away, using what techniques and methods come to hand. In the words of Albert Einstein:

The important thing is not to stop questioning.

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