The BA's Journey – From a Current to a Future State

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Overview

Many words have been written about the process of business analysis and how it can be performed on different types of projects. There are a multitude of tools and techniques which can be used plus methodologies and frameworks to suit a wide variety of circumstances. This makes it all too easy to get absorbed in the day-to-day detail and forget about the real purpose of business analysis – to fix a problem or provide the organisation with a new capability.

An easy way to stay focused on this objective is to think of business analysis as a journey – a journey from an *as is* to a *to be* system - from a current to a future state. Software development methodologies (SDLC's) such as agile, iterative, waterfall, etc. are the means of travel but you don't have to be an expert in methodologies to have a successful journey. The following extract from IRM's Business Analysis workshop is a simple guide which can be used (whatever the methodology) to help you keep a clear picture of what a successful journey entails – reaching your destination.

Start at Journey's End

More than anything, business analysis benefits from knowing where you're going. Knowing what problems you're trying to solve or what new capability you're planning to implement. If you can define these up front then knowing when you've got there becomes a whole lot easier. Wherever possible use hard facts and figures as acceptance criteria for each business requirement. Note that your client will be very emphatic about what they want – maybe not so clear about what they actually need!

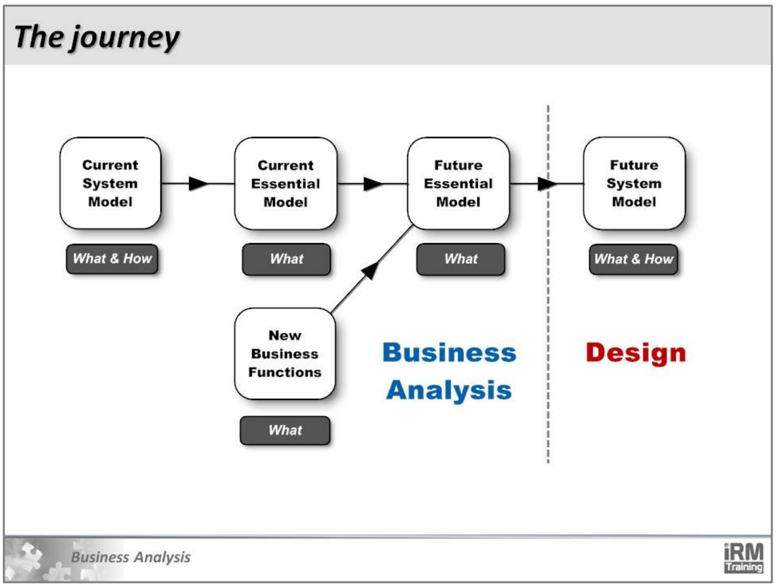
Sometimes however it's not possible to know these things with certainty but you will have to start the journey anyway. There may be business imperatives or competitor pressures which force you to take a "journey of discovery" – to find out what gives you a competitive edge and what doesn't. Or you may need to roll out a system which you know will have to change as it gets implemented.

This is where good decision making skills are essential. Someone (client, sponsor, business analyst, project manager) will have to make a business decision as to what constitutes "good enough". The perfect solution rarely exists and if it does it will probably change in 6 months time. You need to avoid getting trapped in a never ending spiral of let's try this, let's try that…

System Viewpoints (route markers)

Those of you familiar with the Unified Modelling Language (UML) will know that it uses multiple types of diagrams to give you different views of the same system. Similarly the business analyst can use multiple viewpoints to track their journey from the current system to the future system.

As you can see in the following diagram, we've identified four models (viewpoints) to represent different stages of our journey. Of course in a project setting some of these may be combined or performed differently depending on the SDLC being used. However by understanding all the models you will be more able to adapt and use them in your own work setting.



Keep in mind that the business analyst's journey ends when the analysis phase of the project is complete. Of course on iterative and agile projects, analysis may occur throughout the project. Similarly, changing business needs (or an unclear target solution) may require multiple analysis phases. However journey's end for any business analysis activity is the physical design phase – that is when people start talking technology.

Models (the business analyst's snapshots)

Just like photos are snapshots of the different places we go on a holiday, so models and diagrams are used to represent and help us understand the different viewpoints on our business analysis journey.

- Current system (physical) model. This shows what the current system does (from a business perspective) and how it does it - processes, methods, technology, operational controls, etc. However we don't want to model everything – just enough to know how the system works. We can then verify this model with our client to ensure our understanding is correct.
- Current Essential (logical) model. This shows only the current business functions, both process and data, that are in the current system. The model should include both computerised (automated) and manual processes. Producing a current essential model is when the business analyst starts to earn their pay and allows them to verify with their client exactly what the current system does, from a business outcomes perspective.
- New business functions model. This model or series of models describes each of the new business requirements. Note that we're producing logical models here, not physical ones. A common method for doing this is event modelling (see the IRM article: [Event based analysis and modelling](#)). Again these models need to be verified with the client.
- Future essential (logical) model. New business functions are incorporated with existing business functions to produce a logical model of what the new system will do.

You'll have noticed that apart from the first model our focus is on what's done, not how it's done. How it's done is up to the designers.

Working with Clients (getting to know the locals)

At all stages of your journey you should take every opportunity to engage with your clients. As mentioned, verifying your models with them is essential to avoid going down the wrong path. There are also other, subtle ways of engaging e.g. developing a current physical model shows you're investing the time to learn about their business, how it works and the issues they face.

Traditional methods of investigation such as interviews, document analysis and observation will not only complement your models but also give you further opportunities to engage with clients and users.

How Essential is Data (do we need local knowledge?)

Most people love process models and process diagrams. They convey a sense of action, of achieving objectives. Things get a bit trickier with data as it's all too easy to forget that processes only exist to move or convert data.

So where is the essential data that underpins the essential business functions we've identified? In many organisations it will reside across several databases and be organised for operational as well as business reasons. Sometimes it will be kept in temporary or duplicate databases.

To identify essential data we again take a logical view and so that we can construct our essential data model (drawn as an entity relationship diagram – ERD). This will show us which data records (entities) are used by our essential business processes and the relationship between them.

For example two essential data entities could be customer name and customer address. In our existing system the relationship is *a customer has one address*. However in our new system we may want to give customers the option of a billing address and one or more shipping addresses. The relationship has now changed to *a customer can have one or more addresses.*

So where is this second (or third) address? Does it reside in another database or if it doesn't, do we need to modify the existing database and also modify the system used to capture customer information? Does the cost of doing this outweigh the benefits of providing billing address and shipping address options to customers?

Identifying new data requirements during analysis can save significant cost (and embarrassment) during design.

Local Laws and Customs

My analogy between business analysis and travel might be wearing a bit thin but two important issues need also be considered.

Business rules is the popular term used to describe business policy and process logic – put simply, when this happens do this. Each organisation has its own rules and will have a policy for (nearly) every eventuality or situation. Whilst we will uncover many of these when performing essential modelling of the current system, our new business requirements may in turn require the organisation to implement new rules or modify existing ones.

Every journey has an impact on the environment just as every new system must fit in with current processes and work patterns. It's often said that successful change management is turning an installation into an implementation. Installing a system usually ends when it's turned on but implementation means it's being productively used. If the new business functions that we've designed don't benefit the people who need to use them then no amount of clever design or fast delivery will make them a success.

The Traveller's Toolkit (essential carry on luggage)

Modelling is one of the most important skills that every business analyst needs. Whether you're working on a fast paced agile project or a multi-year systems implementation, you still need to:

- understand the business and the issues they face (current physical and essential models)
- understand what they're trying to achieve (new business functions model)
- understand what the new system will do (future essential model)

In the words of a rather famous scientist and thinker: