The Creative Business Analyst
Part 3 – Making Better Decisions

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Overview

Now that we've thoroughly understood the problem or opportunity we're trying to address (The Creative Business Analyst Part 1) and come up with lots of ideas (Part 2), it's time to be selective and decide which of our ideas will solve the problem and can be implemented by our organisation.

In this final paper of the series we look at decision making techniques – how to select the best idea from the many we've come up with – and how to justify our recommendation to our client, manager and peers.

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 and 2009 conferences.

So what is a solution?

Unfortunately the word solution means different things to different people - to a designer it describes the architecture of the application. To a developer it defines how the application will be coded and to a project manager, how the application will be built and implemented. However, to the client (and business analyst) it means ***what*** the system will do.

This difference in interpretation – ***how*** as opposed to ***what*** – is the source of much confusion. As business analysts we're primarily concerned with what a solution will deliver for the business. The following definition from the *Business Analysis Body of Knowledge® V2* sums it up very neatly:

"A solution is a set of changes to the current state of an organization that are made in order to enable that organization to meet a business need, solve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity".

Note that there's nothing in this definition about how the solution will be implemented. We all know that in practice we have to take into account constraints (non-functional requirements) but our primary aim is to meet the business objective of our client and our thinking needs to be in this order – objectives first, constraints (including technology) second.

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Characteristics of a good solution

If creativity means generating lots of solution ideas (The Creative Business Analyst Part 2) then innovation is all about turning these ideas into reality. Innovation doesn't have to be revolutionary, radical or ground breaking but it should add business value. Adding value can mean doing things:

- Cheaper
- Faster
- More efficiently
- More effectively

Even re-using or finding new uses for current systems and assets is adding value. Coming up with new or novel ideas can be personally satisfying but, often as not, the solution may have been right in front of you and just needed a different way of looking at the problem.

We often have an instinctive feeling about what constitutes a good idea or solution. Characteristics we look for include:

- Solves one or a number of problems
- Is acceptable to users, clients and stakeholders
- Can absorb medium term business growth
- Can be implemented in a realistic timeframe
- Fits the strategy, culture and politics of the organisation
- Is technically and organisationally feasible

Whatever the solution or recommendation you want to put forward, you have to believe it. Satisfy yourself that it really is the best option. If you don't believe in it, how do you expect others to?

Evaluating ideas

Whatever method you've used to come up with ideas – brainwriting, brainstorming, checklists, visualisation - you'll have remembered not to make judgments or dismiss any of them. Quantity over quality, right? Incubating ideas – sitting on them – allows the subconscious to go to work and ensures that when you evaluate them you're using a different mindset to when the idea first came up.

Accepting or rejecting ideas can be an emotive process, particularly in a team environment where people may have a personal attachment to the ideas they've put forward. You need to be diplomatic and obtain agreement as to what are the mandatory criteria that an idea must meet in order to be considered.

Decision making techniques

There's no magic bullet for making decisions – no automated process that will do the job for you. People make decisions and as a business analyst you will have to decide which

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ideas you will be recommending to your clients. Start by classifying your ideas using mandatory and desirable criteria. If an idea is to make your short list it **MUST** satisfy the mandatory criteria. A statement of functionality containing the word must is a good starting point and evaluating an idea against this leads to a simple yes/no decision.

Often you will have several ideas which meet your mandatory criteria – how do you compare them? One of the most popular techniques is to construct a decision matrix. The following example from the Department of Education in the USA was used to aid policy making decisions.

Options	Criteria for Choice						
	Cost	Personnel Needs	Track Record	Public Acceptance	Administrative Feasability	Agency Acceptance	Other
Subsidy to qualified programs							
Vouchers - direct support to families							
Support to infrastructure							
Subsidy for comprehensive planning							
Direct payment to teachers							
Industry child care							
Status quo							

Not all the options could be implemented so managers were asked to rate criteria for each option with a plus or a minus. Interestingly, the objective of using the matrix was to slow down the decision making process by getting managers to think in-depth about each of the options. Child care policy is an emotive issue, using this matrix slowed down the "rush to judgement". You can read the full case study at http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/pdfs/spot8.pdf

Other approaches for decision making include:

- Make a T chart. List all the positives of an idea on one side of the T and all the negatives on the other.
- As with understanding problems and generating ideas, Edward De Bono's *Six Hats* method is a useful technique for decision making. Look at each solution candidate from a *factual, emotional, pessimistic, optimistic, creative* and *logical* point of view.
- The Straw Man argument – build it up and knock it down. Ever had an idea that just feels right to you - just jumps out as being the best? This type of approach, similar to the methods used by the world-leading management consulting firm McKinsey, relies heavily on detailed analysis. From this a hypothesis (proposition) is developed, based largely on the intuitive conclusions of the consultant performing the analysis. The consultant, and others, then tries to disprove the hypothesis. If it stands up to this scrutiny then it's accepted as the most workable solution.
- Buridan's Ass, a paradox named after the 14th Century French philosopher Jean Buridan (but also found in the writing's of Aristotle). The paradox describes how an ass (donkey) sitting between two equally attractive piles of hay, can't decide which one to eat and so starves to death. Modern translation – if there are two equally attractive options, chose the one with the least negatives.

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Whatever decision you do make there will always be an element of risk. You'll need to assess:

- Solution risk – will it work
- Organisational risk – can we do it
- Implementation risk – what if something goes wrong

Including a risk assessment and risk management plan will need to be an integral component of your recommendation.

The forensic business analyst

Being a business analyst is a bit like being a detective. We investigate everything – even the obvious – looking for evidence, clues and exceptions. We check every alibi and fact looking for motives, opportunities and reasons why. We'll usually find a prime suspect, whether it's evidence-based through analysis, or a hunch which we then try and disprove. And like criminal cases, we're seeking a conclusion. We're after a solution which will allow us to bring closure to this problem, need or opportunity and allow us to move on to the next one.

Of course there's more to being a business analyst than just being creative. There are other essential skills necessary to doing the job well. However the satisfaction from hearing a client say "*wow – I'd never though of doing it that way*" is pretty hard to beat.

"The important thing is not to stop questioning"

Albert Einstein

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