

The Top Five* Skills a Business Analyst Needs to Succeed

By Glenn R. Brûlé - Executive Director of Client Solutions, ESI International

As a long serving (and philosophical!) business analyst, I have often thought about what makes us business analysts great at our jobs. I have come across many different kinds of people from all walks of life in the BA profession. However, the truly great business analysts have certain skills and attributes in common. This quote (from Rudyard Kipling - unfortunately I can't claim credit) sums up quite nicely, what I believe are the key skills needed by aspiring great business analysts.

"I keep six honest serving men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What and Why and When And How and Where and Who."

The business analyst needs to be aware of the What, Why, When, How, Where and Who...and more importantly, needs to be able to mobilise all those areas to produce a finished product that elicits a Wow*. **Wow is the noise we hope to hear from a happy customer/stakeholder when the end result is as they had imagined and does the job they needed it to do!*

So in a bit more detail, what are the skills a business analyst needs in order to produce exceptional quality work? I will take a look, at what I consider to be, the five* key areas below

* Please note that this list is not exhaustive, these are just the main areas that I have come across in my career so far.

1. Smart Listening

Even the best finished product/end result is useless if it doesn't match the original requirements or isn't how the customer pictured it. Business analysts need to be able to accurately gather requirements. This means sometimes understanding what the customer is trying to outline before they fully understand it themselves. It is important to understand the expectations of the customer - if the customer is expecting something that isn't delivered; the project will feel like a failure to them, even if you believe it is a job well done. In short smart listening means being empathetic, empathy builds trust, and trust gets people to both talk and listen. You also need to be able to understand current processes and have a grasp of what it is that they are trying to overcome e.g. what problem are they trying to solve. This brings me neatly to my next point...

2. Problem Solving

It is great if you deliver exactly what the customer asks for, but not if it doesn't address the issue that the project was initiated to address. Business analysts need to have a sense of whether the requirements that the customer is outlining, will actually address the business issue at hand, which in turn must support an organisations strategic goals and objectives. If not, BAs need to be able to think analytically and creatively to think of alternatives, or they need to be able to push customers to think of alternatives themselves. This can be done through clever facilitation.

3. Facilitation

BA's have to be able to help customers articulate what it is that they want achieve. Sometimes they will need to push for more details and ask questions in a specific way to extract the information. They need to be able to keep people on track during discussions to get the most productive results. When agreeing to certain requirements, they also need to be aware of what is and isn't within the project's scope. Business analysts are NOT negotiators but facilitators of crucial, and honest straight talk, bringing a group to consensus on their understanding of requirements, while a scientific art, is critical to the implementation of requirements.

A way of managing this is by sectioning requirements into 'Must Haves' and 'Nice to Haves.' Customers' expectations have to be managed, through a variety of elicitation techniques, so that they are realistic.

4. Detail and Organisation

Sounds boring I know, but good documentation skills really are important...details are important in process mapping and 'Use Cases.' Traceability is a BA's best friend, through meticulous and detailed documentation, traceability will ensure that requirements are clear, concise, accurate, unambiguous and demonstrate lineage to and from the originally stated goals and objectives, this will make the executive management that much more supportive where budget, and resources are concerned.

5. Interaction

(Please note I use this term rather than 'communication' as communication gives the perception of a one way dialogue)

Last but not least, business analysts need to have great interaction skills. They need to be able to communicate to all those involved with the initiative - to elicit and report on requirements and to keep all stakeholders up dated. A great business analyst will be able to communicate the importance of a project to others, and motivate them to complete it by painting a picture of the benefits. Interaction not only involves smart listening (see above), but delivering the right message, carefully crafted questions, meticulously planned elicitation workshops, and pinpoint precision when it comes to putting pen to paper.

Most importantly, business analysts need to have a positive attitude. There can be many obstacles and misunderstandings on the road to success...so it is vital to stay positive and to look for that bigger picture. I welcome any input you may have on this subject so feel free to get in touch, just send an email to enquiries@esi-intl.co.uk.

About Glenn R. Brûlé - Executive Director of Client Solutions

Glenn Brûlé has more than 20 years of experience in many facets of business, including project management, business analysis, software design and facilitation. He is responsible for supporting a global team of business consultants working with Fortune 1000 organizations. Glenn's background as an educator, communicator and business consultant has served him well through his many client engagements. These engagements have focused on understanding, diagnosing and providing workable business solutions to complex problems across various industries, including financial services, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, insurance and automotive, as well as government agencies.

In addition to his position at ESI, Glenn is a founding member and has served as a Director at Large for the International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA). Glenn is the former Vice President of Chapters for the IIBA®. Glenn has authored numerous articles on business analysis and continues to write insightful whitepapers for ESI. He has just released the "CBAP™ Exam: Practice Test and Study Guide" and the "Business Analysis Glossary of Terms."