5 Critical Requirements Steps that get Missed: What Business Analysts Are Not Doing

By Barbara Davis

Over the years, I have worked with, mentored, trained, managed and interviewed hundreds of Business Analysts. What I am about to tell you will shock you. 99%[1] of the analysts I have worked with are missing critical steps in requirements.

But don't blame the analysts. They are missing these steps because business analysis is still a collective practice and not a formal profession with standardized tasks, metrics and tools. Many of the analysts are simply borrowing tasks, tools and techniques from other development areas.

The lack of professional formalization means that there is no single tried and true set of business analysis best practices. There are indeed some commonalities, but without a standardized set of best practices, there can be no real assurances that enough has been done to ensure that we have captured the right requirements for the right products. This is exactly where we get stats that illustrate only 20%[2] of features are used all the time and 42%[3] are never used!

So what tasks could your BA's be doing that can change all this? These tasks are Research, Gap Assessment (vs. gap analysis), Ambiguity Management, Requirements Validation and Facilitated Sign-Off. More importantly, how can you tell that your BA's are not doing these tasks? Let's examine each of these to understand what they are, what they look like and what the direct quantifiable results are.

Research

There are a lot of components that need to be understood in order to build accurate requirements, and only one of those is user input. Going to the users should be the LAST task a BA does in requirements elicitation, yet, when interviewed, the single-most common answer for they determine requirements, is "I go to the user." The fact is that there is already a lot of detailed information contained within the project documentation, existing application and environment documentation. The BA needs to study this and understand business problem, goals & objectives of the project, scope, the environment the new application will reside in and how it will interact with and impact other applications within that environment.

By the time the user gets involved, the BA should already have a draft of context diagrams, workflow, requirements management framework, peripheral gap analysis, a high level draft of requirements and a plan of how they will accomplish the work on this particular project.

[1] Interview Research; Barbara Davis; compiled during interviews spanning 2006-2009
[2] Building Requirements Consensus; Cook Enterprise Corporation
[3] Building Requirements Consensus; Cook Enterprise Corporation

Gap Assessment (vs. Gap Analysis)

Gap analysis is a small sliver of the work that comprises Gap Assessment. Where gap analysis analyzes individual gaps on a given project, gap assessment takes it further and manages gaps in the same way that issues would be managed, assesses risk & impacts and draws links between gaps and the areas that are impacted by those gaps.

Ambiguity Management

Ambiguities are a common part of life. How many people can program the clock on their VCR? Ever read the directions for putting together a new toy or piece of furniture? Have you ever had a conversation with someone and gotten the wrong message?

All too often, we speak before listening and listen without hearing. In writing, our brains complete thoughts that aren't there and in general, we forget to look at things from other perspectives and get feedback from others. In requirements, this creates ambiguities. Evidence suggests that ambiguities are the leading cause of our low project success rates, missed functionality and unused features. In a nutshell, ambiguities are risks!

The only way to ensure that ambiguities in requirements are exposed and addressed is to put a solid process for Ambiguity Management that is comprised of a set of clear steps that deals with each of the reasons that ambiguities even exist. Further, ambiguities as risk must be managed in the same way the risks are managed throughout the project to reduce occurrence and mitigate the impacts and effects.

Requirements Validation

During the hundreds of interviews I have conducted, I always ask the candidate how they validate their requirements. Again, 99%[4] say they "Go back to the user", and are completely stumped when I ask them what they do when the user doesn't know. The fact is there are lots of proven tools and techniques out there that will support validation. The analyst just doesn't know how to apply them to achieve the best result. They simply can't see the value of using them when they are not sure how the tools work and how it will impact the quality of their work.

Egos aside, candid conversations with business analysts tell me that everyone is struggling and learning by the seat of their pants. This is a direct result of the lack of practice formalization. Very few analysts are actually going to come out and say it. We all want to have a level of job satisfaction and feel like we're competent and to be seen as competent by our colleagues. This means they are not going ask for help and advice on which tools and techniques they should be using to validate requirements.

You can uncover this problem by looking at the numbers of projects within your organization that have scope creep, users and stakeholders complaining about missed functionality, projects are taking longer to develop than estimated and your break and fix cycles are off the map. If you notice these patterns, my best advice is to work with your analysts to educate them and bring in a formal methodology that encompasses specific validation techniques. Any methodology that does not include a specific set of validation steps is incomplete and not worth the money you will spend on it.

[4] Interview Research; Barbara Davis; compiled during interviews spanning 2006-2009

Facilitated Sign-Off

The final step that business analysts are missing is something that some are actually doing, but not necessarily doing well. This is facilitated sign-off. I can't tell you how many analysts have asked me how I get stakeholders to read the requirements document. It is one of the most significant challenges facing an analyst.

First, I assume that stakeholders will not read it even though I give them time to do so. I also assume that those who do generally do not read it thoroughly enough to understand the details. That's okay. I don't need them to. I do need the stakeholders to understand the functionality represented by the requirements. The best way for them to really understand this is to participate in a facilitated walk-through of the functionality and sign off on that.

No Time Like the Present

All in all, missing any of these critical steps not only increases the risks your project will face, but will add to development and maintenance costs and decrease the overall ROI you will be able to realize from your applications. This translates into a reduced ability to support your core business and an inability to remain competitive.

Sure you're busy. But can you afford not take action and change the outcomes of your projects? Why not make 2010 the year you become a corporate hero and help your organization rebound from the economic down-turn by hitting the ground running?

About the Author

Barbara Davis came into technology with over fifteen years of experience including professional training, project management, community development, business ownership, change management and conflict resolution. She has drawn on these experiences throughout the course of her role as a Business Analyst over the past nine years.

In 2003, Barbara worked to introduce the world's first university accredited Business Analysis diploma program. The first course ran in 2005 with the approval of University of Winnipeg Student Senate.

She has become a champion for the practice by defining the BA career path, assessment tools, competencies, Key Performance Indicators, educational programs, centers of excellence, auditing and redefining practice methodologies at companies such as UST Global, Safeway and HEB.

Barbara interviewed and assessed approximately 300 BA's of all career levels as part of her role as Practice Director of UST Global's Business Analysis and Requirements Center of Excellence. Her former manager commented, that "She led all other CoE's in defining BA standards and assessments, setting the standard for such infrastructure within UST… her imaginative work has led to the formation of a BA Community within UST, which has become a cohesive force for best practices."

UST Global's CEO made the following commentary in an email to their executive: "Presence of strong BAs in the accounts virtually assures our long term proposition and increases the visibility and respect for UST in comparison with the rest of the competition. We have some outstanding BAs in various accounts. Many of them did not have formal training or assessment and didn’t really have a career plan. Under Barbara’s efforts, this has shown marked change.”

As President of E2 Consulting, Barbara has defined new methodologies for requirements, organizational change, resource management; has written many articles; developed & conducted numerous workshops and training sessions.