

The Professional BA: how can it be achieved?

by Tshepo Matjila

The modern business analyst is increasingly pressured to do more, to know more, to communicate more with less and less tools and training by project stakeholders wherever they exist. Although some of the expectations from business and the BA manager(s) may be outlandish, it will no longer cut it for a professional business analyst to abdicate himself or herself from performing at the expected professional level. A smart business analyst might be tempted to ask: “how do I ensure that I, as a BA, always meet the expectations and match my performance to those of my project stakeholders consistently and in a professional manner?”

Projects failure rate concerns

THAT, my friends, is the crux of the subject today. According to Jim Johnson, Chairman of the Standish Group, well over 68% of all projects in 2009 failed due to poor requirements, late delivery and those projects were mostly over budget. Even bleaker was the fact that these numbers were the worst failure rate in the past decade. Any requirements-linked project failure is an indictment on the skill and profession of the business analyst— there is no two ways about it.

How then do we as professionals in the business analysis space respond to such calamity? Clearly if we leave the status quo, we will all be out of employ in the next few years. Who, in their right minds, would want to hire a business analyst if we continuously fail to prove, via project successes, that we can add value to their business and its operations?

Top 6 suggestions to improve Business Analysis

Below are my top six suggestions which I believe can improve the image and value of business analysis as a science and a trusted business partner:

1. Training

Training is one of the most underrated, but one of the pivotal topics in business analysis. Most of today's business analysts are in-bred from other roles and when they start playing the role of an analyst, business does not support them with adequate and relevant training. You are told ‘you know the business, you will do fine’ and then left to your own devices.

The lucky ones get a few in-house training courses on this and other courses and then unleashed to serve the trade. There is everything wrong with the above approach and it is such a clumsy regard for the science of business analysis that it is giving the profession a bad name. The results are there in the CHAOS report to see.

2. Expectations Management

Expectations management is another one of my concerns with regard to business analysis and business analysts in particular. If business keeps adding to the scope of a project with less regard to the impact on delivery time and quality, the CHAOS report is not going to get any better soon. Better still, if a business analyst does not know how to ASSERTIVELY push back on some of the outlandish business expectations by managing scope creep, we are foolishly going nowhere fast. The modern BA needs to have assertiveness skills as one of the tools in his/her BA toolkit to counterbalance business' expectations with delivery mandates.

3. Communication skills

Communication, communication, communication!

This sub-topic cannot be overemphasized. A business analyst is not just the business suit and the title, but also his/her ability to clearly articulate his/her question(s) and to clearly articulate business's requirements – that skill is embedded in communication.

Also, communication is a large part of what our profession entails and this is not about to change; the more a business analyst can communicate effectively, the more business and IT will entrust us with good requirements documenting.

4. Documentation skills

It is deliberate from my side to put this sub-topic below the one above, mainly because after communicating, things might need to be documented or to be updated. A business analyst's artefacts or documents are always living documents. At each changing point the BA must ensure that the changes are documented properly and in the correct artefacts otherwise solutions might be developed sans crucial information leading to even greater failures and worse more diminished reputation as the business might feel like their input was not taken into account.

5. Facilitation skills

A lot of what we also do as BA's is setting up and attending meetings. We love meetings don't we? Facilitation skills are crucial in such setups in that as a business analyst you must ensure that at all times you are in charge of the meetings you chair without stifling good debates from the attendees. Knowing when to switch play from a domineering contributor to others who are not saying much but have something to say is a skill which does not come natural to all but nevertheless can be learned. This point links up nicely with point 1 above.

6. Community of Practice (COP)

My sixth and final suggestion is about a community of business analysts. BA's need this forum to come together to share best practice, look at industry trends and to standardize the approach within the company and ultimately influence the industry.

Management buy-in is crucial for such a forum to thrive and it is vital that the steering committee of the COP engage with the powers-that-be to ensure that the works and recommendations of the COP do not exist in vacuum.

Conclusion

Business Analysis is an evolving and exciting discipline which can add tremendous value for business and IT shops if managed and adequately equipped, but the inverse is also true. It is therefore important that the BA COP be established within the company to advise, standardize and recommend appropriate and industry-acceptable training to ensure relevance and add value to the business, its strategies and operations.

About the Author

Tshepo Matjila is a passionate Business Analyst who has over 3 years of business analysis experience working in the financial sector. His interests span blogging, community building and knowledge sharing. He lives in sunny South Africa and has enjoyed the World Cup immensely. 😊