

The Role of the BA in Creating a Common Vision

New Approach to Software Development Brings Welcomed Level of Predictability

Lack of predictability in getting a new product or service to market is one of the biggest threats a business can face. This problem is pervasive and many businesses are simply unaware there is a better, more predictable approach to deliver projects.

Let's start with a couple of all too common project scenarios.

Scenario 1: A new IT project is starting up; it's a high priority project with good executive support. The technology team has examined the project definition from the business, and the project estimate has been given: **"The Project will cost \$1.3 million and will take 7 months to deliver."**

A project team is assembled. They go to work; a project plan is created; detailed requirements are gathered; changes are tracked; and process is followed.

It's now 7 months later ... and the project isn't done. How much is it really going to cost? How much longer will the project really take?

Scenario 2: A similar project is actually delivered on-time and on-budget by standard measurements. However, in order to make the budget and schedule, ½ of the functionality has been "de-scoped", moved to the nebulous "phase 2" of the project. The business stakeholders are upset – the delivered solution isn't what they asked for; it doesn't deliver the business value that was requested.

How do we decide what to include and not include in the project? How do we know that business value is achieved?

How do we turn these situations around and bring **predictability** into what is delivered and when it is delivered? And, how can a strong Business Analyst insure that this happens?

Creating a Common Vision

The first step to creating a predictable delivery process is to create a common vision among all **business** stakeholders. Without a common vision, the various business stakeholders all have different ideas of what the solution should be. If IT is engaged at this point, they will try to find a solution that they *think* will best meet the needs. But, in doing this, the business stakeholders are abdicating their ownership of the solution that they are paying for and IT is putting itself in a no-win situation.

Clear and common objectives drive alignment, provide transparency, and bring predictability to the project. The key here is to create a common shared vision that is reasonably accurate in a reasonable amount of time.

Getting PredictableSM* is a results driven approach to software development that integrates exceptionally well with business analysis skills. This article focuses on how the Business Analyst can use these techniques to set the foundation for a highly predictable project.

We find that this level of alignment is best achieved through a series of ½ day workshops with business stakeholders over a 2-4 week period, (rather than months), using three core techniques

- **Business Process Analysis (BPA)** – Here, business processes are defined along with their associated tasks and activities to create a **common vision** of the width of the project. Spend time defining both what is in scope and what is NOT in scope. Clarifying what is not in scope adds to the common vision of what the project does include.
- **Business Process Scenarios (BPS)** – Next, identify the key workflows/scenarios that capture the **intent** of the system. These scenarios use the activities and tasks identified during the BPA and become the basis for defining the work to be done for this project. They identify what **success** looks like to the business stakeholders.
- **Lo-fi Complex Scenarios** – Building paper prototypes of screens and creating Excel mock ups of reports further clarify the more complex business scenarios defined for a system. These are created by the Business Stakeholders to represent **their** vision and show the intent of the system in more detail.

Teams using these techniques can go to a sufficient depth to gain common understanding and agreement to scope of project as well as the information to realistically define the level of effort needed. They are not intended to be used to resolve all open issues or to develop detailed specifications. Rather, they are used to enable the team to get to the next step of predictability.

BA Role in Creating a Common Vision

The Business Analyst plays a key role in creating the common vision. The BA needs to be able to represent the business stakeholders' vision to the development team. And, the BA needs to be able to represent the development team's issues to the business stakeholders. It is critical that the BA participate in and fully understand the business vision for the project.

BA as Facilitator

A skilled facilitator is required to ensure success with the series BPA and BPS workshops. The BA is an excellent candidate for this role. Key skills needed for the BPA and BPS facilitation include:

- Ability to draw out all applicable business processes from the business stakeholders.
- Discipline to not drive the business resources to a specific solution. These sessions are there for the business to define their processes, not to be persuaded to use processes that are favored by the IT department.
- Aptitude for encouraging healthy disagreement among the stakeholders. Only by getting all issues on the table for discussion is a transparent, common vision truly reached.
- Skill in organizing and summarizing on the board the points that the business stakeholders make – in the language of the business.
- Capability to encourage the business stakeholders to be truly creative and open in their contributions.
- Analytical enough to offer suggestions for missing processes and scenarios based on the business discussions, without imposing pre-conceived ideas of what the processes should be.

- Ability to drive the business stakeholders to reach a consensus on what is and is NOT in scope for the project.

BA as Scribe

Another key role that a Business Analyst is an excellent candidate for is the Scribe. The Scribe role is critical to a successful BPA and BPS process. Working in conjunction with the Facilitator, the Scribe uses the following skills:

- Capture of the business processes and activities that the Facilitator writes on the board.
- Capture of all Issues and parking lot items in a clear and concise way.
- Provide suggestions to the Facilitator (e.g., “Should this issue go in the parking lot?”) if the session starts to lose focus.
- Coordinate with the Facilitator during breaks to offer suggestions on approach or key areas for the next part of the session.
- Document the BPA and/or BPS components from each session for review and follow up in the next day’s session.

The Scribe role is critical to a predictable delivery process. Clear, concise and timely documentation of the business processes and scenarios enables the business stakeholders to review their progress and confirm that consensus has been reached.

BA as Mentor

The Business Analyst tends to have a lot of business knowledge and empathy with the business stakeholders. The steps defined in this article represent a new way of approaching the definition of a project and initially can be uncomfortable for some business stakeholders. The unique perspective of the BA – understating both the business and technical perspectives of a project – enables the BA to be a good resource in working with the business stakeholders in defining their processes, uncovering all key scenarios, and creating efficient lo-fi’s.

It is critical, though, for the BA to enable the business to do the work, not to do the work for them. This fosters a partnership approach to defining the solution and ensures that buy-in is obtained from all stakeholders.

What’s Next

Creating the common vision is a critical first step towards getting predictable. However, it is only the start of the process. There are other steps and roles that are also necessary to gain true predictability. A common set of metrics, a release plan built on the defined components are also needed. The Project Manager and the Architect also play key roles in achieving predictability.

Finally, once the project is defined and in progress, the Business Analyst, the Project Manager and Architect play key roles in maintaining predictability throughout the project.

* *Getting PredictableSM* is the development methodology used by custom software firm, Geneca, to diminish the problems typically associated with the software development process. To learn more about *Getting PredictableSM*, visit www.geneca.com.

About the Author:

Ms. Brunsting has over twenty years experience in all aspects of business analysis, systems development and project management, from project inception to customer acceptance. She is skilled in the analysis of business problems, as well as the design, implementation, testing, and on-going support of technical solutions. Her areas of expertise include Interactive Solutions, e-Business Solutions, Financial Systems, Gaming and Lottery Systems, Telecommunications (Operator Console, Voice Recognition, and Call Processing), Order Entry/Subscription Services, and Database Design. Ms. Brunsting is also the President of the Chicagoland chapter of the International Institute of Business AnalysisTM.
