

What is a Business Analyst?

The Search for a Business Analyst Thoughts from a Recruiting Manager

The Casey Group is a professional services firm specializing in custom software development and outsourcing. Our search for Business Analysts led us to the International Institute of Business Analysis and, subsequently, to the Requirements Networking Group. What we discovered was that, while the Business Analyst function has matured over the years into a specialty discipline, it still means different things to different people, employers and practitioners alike. From the standpoint of a staffing manager for a professional services firm, this is how we see it.

What is a Business Analyst?

This proved to be a more difficult question than we thought it would be. And the answer, as for so many things, is "...it depends." In our attempt to fully define the requirements of the position in order to locate the most qualified individuals, we spoke to hiring managers, Project Managers and Technical Architects. The problem we ran into was that there is not just one concept of a Business Analyst. And even within the Business Analyst function, there are different sub-functions that can evolve as specialties in and of themselves. There is a continuum from a Lead Analyst to an analysis tool expert technician. Sometimes we look for one person who can perform all the functions, oftentimes we need a team.

Business Analysis also means different things to different companies. Some corporations, with established, entrenched systems, are merely looking for someone who understands the current environment and can integrate new requirements into their existing processes and systems, often more of a Subject Matter Expert or a Systems Analyst than a Business Analyst. At the other end of the spectrum, as a professional services company, we are looking for consultative BAs who can understand our clients' business processes, assist them with business process re-engineering, and elicit the business requirements that need to be satisfied.

The objective of a Business Analyst

The objective of a Business Analyst is to elicit, capture and document the sequence and relationship among business process and their business rules that make up the guts of each process. The processes are intellectual capital that

must be eventually cast into the digital format that makes up an information system.

In order to successfully achieve the objective, the BA must combine several technical skills as well as savvy interpersonal skills into a seamless skills flow of creation and integration. This requires a consistent method rather than an ad-hoc approach.

Over the years there have been many variations on the basic software development life cycle – **Requirements, Analysis, Design, Build, Test Implementation**. The variations have spawned many philosophic discussions covering Waterfall, Iterative, Agile, Spiral, etc. No doubt they will continue. The Business analyst must be able to distinguish between the methods and yet still understand how the methods are similar; that all the methods spring from the same fundamental approach. This ability to critically consider each method's structure and content and understand similarities among methods will assure the BA always maintains a mindful and clear approach to what he/she is doing and is not carried away with the rote execution of a popular method just for the sake of its pure execution. The method is not an end in itself. The analyst must remember that the objective of analysis is to get meaningful, working code out the door to support the business's goals.

What do we look for in a BA resume?

So, what do we look for when we recruit for Business Analysts?

The ideal Business Analyst **for us** comes from the development world with experience in structured systems analysis, application architecture and software design, and application program development. .

We prefer someone who has a background in testing so that requirements can be written anticipating what will be required for the test process.

The most important thing we can stress is "Don't try to be something you're not." Chances are, you can't be all things to all people. Accept the fact that different employers are going to want different things from a Business Analyst and that you will probably have strengths in certain areas and not be as strong in others. Understand where you fit and be specific about your skill area. Yes, target your resume by looking at what the employer is looking for, but don't skew your experience to something it is not. That's just a waste of your time and the recruiter's.

In terms of format, the skill summary and competencies should be listed up front. This provides the recruiter with a framework for your experience and s/he can quickly determine whether your background matches the job requirements. This

is the Profile or Summary or Objective. It tells the recruiter who you are –what are your general skills, general characteristics, personality traits, and industry verticals, if any.

Also up front or, if in the body of the resume, highlighted, should be the tools that you have used and/or any certifications.

For each project, include the scope, the size of the project (in \$ or staff), what your specific role was, what you delivered, and what industry it supported. We're looking for concise, understandable descriptions. Be specific about your role. Did you actually do Business Process Engineering or did you support it by documenting and/or creating the model?

Business Analysis requires Business Writing, so make it obvious you can do this. If your resume is not well-organized, what will your requirements look like?

Some key things we look for, and why, are:

- Titles/functions: Business Analyst (BA), Business Systems Analyst, Systems Analyst (if the focus is on tools)
- Experience: Key words include Business Process Engineering (BPE), Business Process Modeling (BPM), Joint Application Development (JAD), business requirements, requirements documentation, process flow diagrams, logical data models,
- Mentoring and leading teams (if position is a lead BA)
- Tools/languages: UML, RUP, Rational Suite, Mercury etc.
- Industry specific terms, if you have a specialization:
For example, an Oracle BA

Education/Certification:

A business degree, preferably an MBA, is important to us because we stress the need to understand the underlying business processes. For our engagements, a PMP certification is not usually important unless the position will be the lead Business Analyst for a large project. Business Analysis training and/or certification would weigh much more heavily. A Black Belt or comparable experience in quality methodologies is a plus.

Behavioral Characteristics: Organization and planning skills, the ability to prioritize small parts within the big picture, articulate, good listener, persuasive, able to assimilate knowledge quickly, ability to separate the useful from the superfluous and act accordingly, innovative, creative, flexible, interested in learning new approaches, confident, detail oriented, logical.

How to prepare for a BA interview

If your resume matches what we are looking for, the next step is the interview. You may interview with several people for the same position; don't assume that they shared the results of their interview with other interviewers. Treat each interview as a standalone event and be prepared to fully describe your background and experiences in each interview.

Again, you may want to be all things to all people but the BA position is so varied in how it is used in different companies that you probably can't. Look at the job description of the position you are applying for – what strengths and skills is the company looking for? Be able to provide examples of instances where you demonstrated the strength and/or skill. Be able to describe similarities in your experiences that match what the company is looking for.

There is a difference between understanding a concept and actually doing something and producing an output. Ability to articulate what you have done is dependent on your grasp of an underlying concept(s). For example, a Project Manager must know what a work breakdown structure (WBS) is. Don't assume that a recruiter does not understand the concepts. Admit it if you only have an understanding of, not experience with, a concept. Don't waste your time or the interviewer's time floundering.

You need to be able to articulate what your role was on a given project and what your value was to the project. We're looking for you to provide details on your approach –what processes and tools did you use?

Be able to describe your strengths and how you used them on projects. Provide examples of challenges and how you addressed/resolved them. Be able to describe what other team members would say about how you were perceived on the project.

You also need to understand what your beliefs are. If you have a strong bias towards a specific development philosophy (e.g., waterfall vs. Agile), you should determine whether your philosophy will mesh with that of the employer. Knowing how to do something but not believing in its value could put you in a position where you will be less effective than if you were doing something you believed in.

If you are asked to provide references, provide the names of people you worked for on different projects. Co-workers are OK, but a manager sees the value a BA provided to the project, so select managers of projects where you had significant deliverables, preferably projects with deliverables that might be similar to the project you are applying for. Let your references know when you give out their name; they will have agreed ahead of time to be a reference but, if you can tell them that someone will be calling in regards to a specific opportunity, they can be prepared to discuss specific instances that match the opportunity.

Conclusion

There are many ideal models for the successful business analyst. The one that is right depends on the needs, the environment and culture of the client. The ideal analyst's ability to meld into the client's culture and communicate with the project stakeholders will determine their success. So, to assure a good match:

- Be able to articulate your personal analysis philosophy
- Be honest in the presentation of your experience, knowledge and skills
- Look for good communication chemistry with the project team.

The successful business analyst is **first and foremost a communicator** who can present complex concepts in an understandable way to the development team.