

Business Analysis: Turning Gloop into Concrete



Business analysis is often seen as a technical skill. The business analyst builds process and data models, writes precise requirements, makes requirements traceable, estimates the effort involved, and so on. These are what we refer to as hard skills. But a business analyst has another set of responsibilities. The business analyst

needs to be able to uncover what it is that stakeholders actually need, and not just what they say they need; to see the big picture when people are talking details. This requires quite different skills: knowing what questions to ask, dealing with vagueness, listening and providing feedback, knowing how to recognise and respond to the behaviour of individuals. This article discusses why successful business analysts combine hard and soft skills.

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Wants and Needs

When a business stakeholder says “I want [something]”, it might be a real, quantifiable need that is relevant to the business. In many cases it is not. People ask for fragments of functionality that relate to their own part of the work, or perpetuate the way things are done now. Or they ask for a solution but don’t fully understand (or know) the need. Sometimes they neglect to mention something because they assume that everyone else knows the things that they themselves know.

Those badly stated wants – the *gloop* – must be understood, translated into the real needs, and transmitted to developers, solution architects, business architects and suppliers. These people need *concrete* – the precise and relevant requirements.

The needs of a business come from many sources. Some of them come from the conscious understanding of stakeholders that an improvement needs to be made to help them do their work. There might also be unconscious needs, “It’s never worked in the past so there’s no point in asking for it. We’ll just continue to work around it.” Another set of needs are those that the stakeholders might not even dream of because they don’t know that a technology exists and has become available and affordable. For example, stakeholders at a rail company did not ask for train drivers to have on-demand scheduling; they believed that the technology was too expensive. However, when the train drivers’ needs were correctly understood, it became apparent that hand-held tablets and some OTS software would be an effective solution to communicating their schedules to the drivers.

Improving Hard Skills

There are established techniques – hard skills – for defining scope, modelling process, data, and dynamics, writing requirements and business rules. These techniques package the knowledge into an understandable form. Most of these techniques involve building a model, Naturally, you use a notation that you are comfortable with, and is known and understood by colleagues.

However, instead of taking the same hard skill every time, it pays to think differently, and to experiment with alternatives for stating a problem or its solution.

Some suggested ways of becoming aware of other techniques are:

- Read a book on a technique you have never used before and try out one of the ideas in your everyday work.
- Join a professional association like the International Institute of Business Analysis, the BCS or the IEEE.
- Identify one of your existing hard skills and allocate half an hour to explore it further on the web. For example, focus your web searches by asking a question such as, “How do I define business rules?”. It’s surprising how many new ideas you find.
- Look at how you are currently producing a deliverable and ask yourself, “Is this really producing a benefit? Do I really need to do this, or am I being driven by habit?”
- Search for interesting blogs and correspond with colleagues about the techniques that they are finding useful.

- Attend a business analysis conference once every year or two.

These ways of improving hard skills suggest you look outwards, and find new ideas in new places. Anything but doing things because that's the way you have always done it.

Improving Soft Skills

People who are responsible for analytical thinking – Product Owners, Business Analysts, Systems Analysts, Systems Architects, and so on, usually have some training (the amount and depth varies enormously) and awareness of their hard skills. But the same is not true for their soft skills.

We ask people what they need. However, the answers we get vary considerably depending on the feelings, attitude, assumptions, mood, personality, experience, and the confidence of the people we are asking. We can't press a button and have everyone behave the way we want them to. Instead of a button, we have soft skills that can make us aware of the differences between people, and help us figure out the most appropriate communication strategy for them.

Some ideas for improving your soft skills:

- How good are you at listening? Do you recognise the difference between hearing – everything that comes in through your ears – and listening – determining the meaning of what you hear and observing it from the point of view of the person telling you?. For more on how to effectively listen, try Nancy Kline's books, *Time to Think* and *More Time to Think*.
- When you believe that you have understood what is being said, try feeding back your understanding. And then be prepared to be wrong. One of the most effective forms of feedback is an informal sketch to show the words and ideas spoken by your subject. This feedback connects you more closely to your subject and you are more likely to elicit even more information when you demonstrate that you are absorbing and understanding that they are saying. For more on using sketches to help communication, we recommend Dan Roam's books, *Back of the Napkin* and *Blah Blah Blah*. Dan also has some video classes on how to use sketches to communicate ideas and understanding.
- Sometimes it is difficult to get feedback: either someone agrees with everything you say, or they say nothing. Sometimes their body

language indicates that they wish you would go away. In these cases, there is a reason for the lack of connection. Perhaps this person does not have the knowledge necessary to answer your questions. Should you be talking to someone else? Maybe this is a person who needs internal reflection before answering a question. Sometimes it's hard to stop an external thinker from talking because they need to talk before they can formulate an answer. Or maybe the person does not see the relevance of your questioning to them. Perhaps the person is afraid that you are going to change or eliminate his job; or he has some political reason for not communicating with you. A recommended book for familiarising yourself with likely communication blockers is *People Skills* by Robert Bolton. For more books on communication and social skills <http://www.bestcollegesonline.com/blog/25-books-to-sharpen-your-social-skills-and-transform-your-career/>

- One last idea is to read biographies of famous people, or works of fiction. Then imagine the characters as if they were someone you are interviewing. How would you interview Hermione Granger in the Harry Potter books? What approach would you take when interviewing Winston Churchill? Or George Washington? Would it be different if you interviewed Beethoven? The idea is to be aware that the people you communicate with are different, and each needs a different mixture of soft skills to achieve a successful communication.
- Attend Penny Pullan's BA Summit, on line every year. Many of the questions and discussions focus towards the soft skills.

Borrowing from other Disciplines

You don't have to start from scratch; you can learn a lot more about soft skills by exploring other professions.

Gillian Tett trained as a cultural anthropologist and spent years living with and studying the culture and customs of village communities in Tibet and the Soviet Union. When Tett changed her career to that of a financial journalist, she realised that she could apply a lot of the insights from studying the village communities to understanding modern organisational behaviour. In the Tibetan village, she observed how people became trapped in their own social group, their team or pocket of knowledge. That of course made communication with other groups more difficult. She recognised this parallel behaviour within organisations, and how it led to "silo thinking",

which in turn reduced ability to communicate. You can learn much more from Gillian Tett's book *The Silo Effect*.

There are other disciplines worth exploring for ideas for improving soft skills. Family Therapy focuses on how family groups work (or don't work) and many of the ideas are applicable to helping a group of stakeholders work together.

Psychology and sociology are packed with ideas for improving your ability to communicate and to help others make connections. These subjects are usually aimed at other topics, but are equally applicable to business analysis.

Borrowing from other disciplines also improves your hard skills. If you come across an architectural diagram, or a marketing survey with an innovative structure, then why not adapt the idea. Being on the lookout for new skills, often in unlikely places, will enhance your ability to turn vague, gloopy, open-ended stuff into concrete business needs.

More information is available:

- <http://www.volere.co.uk>
- Three books written by James Robertson & Suzanne Robertson, the most relevant to this article is *Mastering the Requirements Process – third edition: Getting Requirements Right*.
- Volere seminars and consulting
- The Volere Requirements Linked In group
<http://www.linkedin.com/e/vgh/2491512/>

Previous articles in this series are available at <http://www.volere.co.uk>

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