

Process-centricity and the Business Analyst's NEW Role

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Recent Debate

Many professionals commented on a question I recently raised at the LinkedIn group of the International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA). The question was, "Is this a call for extinction of business analysts?"

What triggered this question was an [Interview at CIO.com](#), where the author of a new usability/design book said, "We want you to replace business analysts with designers." Those commenting on the discussion generally thought that the statement simply reflected a lack of understanding of software engineering.

And what did I think? Just the opposite of what the author suggested – Business Analysts (BA) should replace usability/design specialists for the task of designing process-centric User Interface (UI) architecture. The key phrase here is "process-centric," which emphasizes the need to do it in a non-traditional way. And my recommendation is only for project teams that develop business applications.

This Article basically shows why the Business Analyst's role and skills set should be extended beyond traditional boundaries. It also provides evidence of success of this approach.

Business Software is Different from Consumer Software

Try an Internet-search for "differences between business software and consumer software" or some such string. You will find some information about how to SELL to the two "markets." But you will hardly find the kind of differences that can help vendors design the better to meet the NEEDS of each market.

A credible, prioritized set of quality factors for each market does not appear to exist. Some disciplines that contribute to software development have been more vocal than others in pushing theirs as more important. Take the usability discipline, for example. Usability, which is such an important factor for consumer software, is touted as all-important for business software as well – often at the cost of more important factors such as business process excellence. Result: While there are some excellent consumer software products, business applications continue to deliver much less value than their true potential. In fact, technology initiatives often create waste and chaos, as Forrester Research founder George Colony said.

Business apps are indeed different from consumer software in many ways. Performance objectives, usage scenarios, buying criteria, etc., of an enterprise are different from those of individual consumers. Here's the most important difference – though an obvious one: Unlike consumer software, business applications involve a business process. Keeping this fact in mind would allow software teams to see what matters most (primary quality factors) to enterprises and what capabilities might be required to achieve those factors.

If Business Software is Business Process, Who Does What?

As we all know, every enterprise is basically engaged in performing "business activities" encompassed in business processes. Therefore, from enterprise perspective, development of a business application is fundamentally about

1. Defining what BUSINESS ACTIVITIES would be performed using technology.
2. Organizing those BUSINESS ACTIVITIES "on" the technology. (a) Some of these activities will be done by people on the user interface while (b) other activities will be done "automatically" by the system.

3. Making it all to work so that those activities actually can be performed.

For most of the tasks above, answers to "Who does which task?" are fairly consistent: The Business Analyst (BA) for item 1 and the technical team for items 3 and 2(b). When it comes to item 2(a) though, we don't see the same level of consistency. User interface (UI) specialists, technical team members, and even BAs have been responsible.

Teams that develop business applications should extend the Business Analyst's role and skills set to include the design of process-centric UI architecture. Let's see why in the next section.

Why Extend?

Here are the reasons:

From our discussion in the preceding section (Item 2), it is clear that the UI is business process, too. (Contrast with the conventional approach, where the UI is viewed merely as a medium for human-computer interaction.)

If UI is business process, then item 2(a) "Architecting the UI" is basically about designing a business process ("on" the UI). (Contrast with the conventional approach, where the task of designing the UI is merely a task of designing human-computer interaction.)

If designing the UI is designing a business process, then this task requires business knowledge, industry expertise, and process innovation/improvement capabilities, too. (Contrast with the conventional approach, where a designer or techie takes over from where the BA traditionally leaves off, that is, after defining requirements. This introduces a different perspective and the business/process focus is often redirected to factors of secondary importance like usability and aesthetics. That results in lost opportunities in terms of process innovation, process efficiencies, and such things of primary importance.

Architecting the UI is a crucial phase when a loss of perspective/focus should not be allowed to happen. The Business Analyst, with appropriate additional skills, is obviously the right candidate. The blended BA should stretch, taking business strategy and processes through effective and efficient implementation "on" the UI. That is the only way to ensure operational-level business-IT alignment as well.

The extended role actually includes the activity of coming up with a high-level unified architecture, which is outside the scope of this article. Architecting the UI is a good first step, anyway.

The Extended Role: Evidence of Success

At a NASDAQ-listed software services company, I created more than 50 BAs with blended [Analysis + Design] capabilities. They delivered unprecedented value to the company's Global customers. The value included 100% to 200% user productivity gains (from reengineered applications), streamlined business process at application level, and, occasionally, improvements to the end-to-end business process.

The new breed's broader role was essential for actualizing the good work they did during the Analysis phase. Designing process-centric UI architecture became an integral responsibility. Take Sunil G, for example. Sunil has made high-impact contributions in several application development/reengineering projects executed for North American companies. His activities in those projects have included

Requirements gathering and definition, providing consulting and coordination at customer sites in the US and Canada

Unified business process improvement

Architecting the improved business process on the user interface, ensuring process-UI alignment (occasionally, Sunil went beyond architecture and designed the entire UI).

Sunil's skills set? I hired Sunil out of college. He came with a Bachelors degree in engineering. This education helped him understand technical issues. Besides, techies accepted him as an "insider" although his heart was focused around business process excellence. Sunil received training in the following areas at my process-centric design COE:

Business process centric approach to application development

Business process management

Conventional business analysis techniques

High-level industry training in most of the industries the company operated in

Business process centric UI architecture

Unlike conventional BAs, who may simply capture requirements and pass them to the technical team, blended BAs have the satisfaction of being proactive contributors to the customer's business process excellence and new levels of IT value.

The Extended Role: Two Conditions for it to Work

Two conditions are mandatory for the extended role to work:

1. **New capabilities are required:** The Business Analyst must have the skill listed in the preceding section. Contrast with conventional approach, where project managers occasionally ask "conventionally-trained BAs" to do UI design as well. Their reasons are different. For example, they may think it is smarter to use fewer resources. Or they may have other reasons such as non-availability of trained UI experts. It is important not to confuse such practices with the blended skills set required for process-centric application development. It is also important to be very clear that I'm talking about having the BAs specially trained for the new extended role – not in conventional UI design, but in *business process centric* UI architecture.
2. **Process-centric framework is required:** The blended BAs operate within a process-centric software development framework. Contrast with convention, where, despite good intentions, software teams end up using a technology-centric approach to application development, with technology and project management metrics driving most of the decisions.

Up to the end of 2007, blended BAs have been deployed in more than 175 application development projects – within a process centric framework. While it would take great commitment to get the new approach to work, the effort is certainly worth it.

References

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Discussions related to this topic: The *Power of New* blog at www.PradeepHenry.blogspot.com

Free self-assessment of business process orientation at your organization at <http://www.processinnovationcenter.com/assessment.html>

More about process-centric approach: www.ProcessInnovationCenter.com

Rebuttal to "Why Are Enterprise Applications Underused?" at CIO.com, Doug Goldberg,
<http://www.requirementsnetwork.com/node/1851>

Author

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