

Should BABOK Include Shorthand?

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The International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA™) Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABOK) risks undercutting its profession-promoting purposes by characterizing business analysis as a largely clerical, mechanically mindless activity.

Like so many aspiring occupations, business analysts are turning to certification as a way to gain the types of respect and rewards accorded classic professions, such as medicine and law. Organizers have sought to emulate the Project Management Institute's (PMI) success, wherein more than 200,000 people have passed their PMP certification exams; millions of attendee days have been spent in related seminars; and increasingly employers have made the PMI's project management certifications a hiring criterion.

Although (hopefully) inadvertent, and yet also intentionally reflecting the actual way many dominant organizers probably (in my opinion, mis-)conceive of business analysis, a body of knowledge (BOK) and related certifications can institutionalize bad ideas along with good ones. Casting misconceptions in a BOK's weight-of-authority concrete can irrevocably harm the profession and impede meaningful learning and innovation.

Just because something is touted by the well-known and those in charge, and even if it's widely accepted, doesn't necessarily make it so, let alone *best*. Don't forget, the powers that be once were pretty adamant that the sun revolved around the earth, which by the way everyone knew was flat; and Brownie did a good job with Hurricane Katrina.

Moreover, those endeavoring to gain acceptance of themselves as speaking for the masses have a habit of establishing defense mechanisms that protect against challenges to their purported one and only true way. Monoliths indignantly deny and dismiss out of hand that their favored characterizations may need to be reconsidered and may call for shooting the messenger who questions them. Just ask Galileo, or read today's news.

The A-word, *analysis*, is the most important, most demanding, and (often, I fear) most missing skill of business analysis. Analysis involves questioning. It's questionable how much a BOK actually can promote skill, and multiple-choice certification exam questions are commonly criticized as unable to measure meaningful analysis skills; but that's not the topic of this article.

Rather, it's BABOK's shortchanging of analysis that prompts the ensuing "shorthand" discussion; and I'd suggest that BABOK's portrayal reflects many frequently-articulated characterizations of business analysis. So, please keep an open mind, allow yourself to consider things objectively from a possibly different perspective, and questioningly analyze BABOK's and many of the various common characterizations of business analysis to assure they indeed are the right ones to promote, institutionalize, and stake our professionalism on.

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What Shorthand Has to Do with It

In its two key Knowledge Areas on Elicitation and Requirements Analysis, I'd suggest BABOK portrays business analysis largely as:

Eliciting from the business users the requirements of the product or system they feel will meet their business needs and then progressively elaborating the stated requirements of that system solution to convert them into terms which enable the project team to develop and implement it.

BABOK's Elicitation Knowledge Area capably describes numerous well-known and commonly-used valuable techniques for drawing forth or bringing out stakeholders' requirements for a target system. However, although presumably not intended, the role of the business analyst as described is essentially *taking dictation* from the business user. Merely prompting and mainly capturing whatever the stakeholder states are ultimately mindless mechanical clerical activities.

Since some readers may not be familiar with dictation, let me explain that it was not so long ago that now-nearly-extinct creatures called stenographers densely populated the office space. For more than a century prior to the relatively recent introduction of doing one's own computerized word processing, the main function of these vitally important and woefully underappreciated clerical workers was to take dictation from the much more highly-valued and highly-compensated white-collar workers and managers.

When taking dictation, the stenographer's job was to capture faithfully what was said exactly as said, mechanically transcribing spoken words onto paper so those words in turn subsequently could be converted into final written documents, typically by another now-nearly-extinct kind of worker called a typist.

Because people generally can speak faster than they can write, more highly-skilled stenographers often used a specialized but still clerical technique called "shorthand," a form of phonetic code which enabled them to transcribe the dictation onto paper much more rapidly, essentially at the speed of speech. Of course, working from dictation captured in shorthand also required a more skilled typist who could read shorthand too.

Typists were charged with making sure the finished copy was grammatically correct and properly spelled, which was an extra challenge when typing from shorthand, since shorthand captured words phonetically rather than actually spelling them out. Typing also was considered purely clerical, mainly emphasizing physical dexterity, even though in fact it probably often required considerable editorial (but not content) analysis to make sense of the phonetic shorthand and rework the executive's frequently inarticulate, incoherent, and incomplete transcribed dictation into final finished typewritten text.

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While I'm sure it's neither intended nor recognized, many common descriptions of the business analyst's job sound very much like the clerical stenography job. *If the business analyst is merely mechanically capturing requirements that the business user dictates, then perhaps that clerical part of the business analyst's job indeed could benefit from learning shorthand so they could take the dictation faster.*

Other Than That, Mrs. Lincoln...

BABOK v2 Section 6.1 describes Requirements Analysis as:

Convert[ing] stated requirements into a description of the required capabilities of a potential solution that will fulfill the actual needs of the stakeholders. To accomplish this, the stated requirements must be analyzed, verified, and validated to ensure they will meet the goals and objectives of the enterprise...Business analysts perform enterprise analysis [a separate Knowledge Area, implied to be performed separately from and prior to Elicitation and Requirements Analysis] in order to understand the goals and objectives underlying a change in the structure and systems of a business, and the larger context within which the change must be implemented.

If all the analyst knows about the requirements is what's been stated/dictated, which often is largely the case, then I'd contend the analyst's ability to "analyze" the stakeholder's stated requirements to ensure they are correct is pretty much comparable to that of the typist's—primarily form rather than substance, which again is essentially clerical.

Punctuating this point, consider what both the requirements and testing establishments overwhelmingly, and sometimes almost exclusively, advocate as constituting requirements review—checking for clarity/ambiguity and testability, where lack of testability mainly reflects lack of clarity. *Requirements can be clear and testable and wrong; and clarity and testability are irrelevant for a requirement which has been overlooked!* A typist can't tell content correctness or completeness; and despite its presumptions of doing meaningful analysis, I wonder whether BABOK business analysis actually can tell much about requirements correctness and completeness either.

Ensuring the product/system requirements will meet the goals and objectives of the enterprise is an illusory and inadequate criterion. Almost by definition, whatever is proposed to be the requirements stem from a perception that they indeed will meet the goals and objectives of the enterprise; and yet, so often, they turn out not to. Part of the difficulty is that *practically anything can seem responsive to goals and objectives; and too often the goals and objectives themselves are inadequate or even wrong.*

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The concepts of “verification” and “validation” are themselves a problem, much more than ordinarily recognized in general, and especially with respect to requirements. Despite seemingly clear definitions in the trade, in practice these concepts’ interpretations can vary considerably; and regardless, in fact they may be insufficient for or even interfere with their intended purposes.

Verification often is equated with static testing review of documents to assure they are consistent with their predecessors. Thus, designs are traced back to requirements; and code is traced back to design. While necessary, such verification often is not sufficient, because it begs the question of whether the predecessor itself is right, which frequently is not, especially the requirements which in many instances may not even have been defined. Moreover, since requirements are essentially the starting point in product/system development, goals and objectives would seem to be about the only potential predecessor for them; and we’ve just identified that goals and objectives can be viewed so broadly as to make verification based on them virtually meaningless.

Validation often is interpreted as dynamic testing execution of a completed product/system to demonstrate that it in fact meets the requirements. Again, the initial weakness with traditional validation is that the requirements themselves may be inadequate or wrong, frequently because what is called “requirements” actually is a form of high-level design. Regardless, such dynamic product/system testing is neither possible nor relevant for validating that the requirements themselves are right.

Consequently, requirements “validation” generally is considered to be review of the documented requirements by users, who are presumed to know what the requirements should be. User review undoubtedly is the most common, most relied upon, and for many organizations the only technique used to assess whether the documented requirements are correct. The effectiveness of such user reviews often may be illusory. Consider that what the user most likely is reviewing is the accuracy of the analyst’s dictation taking, not the accuracy of what the user dictated.

While users usually do have subject area knowledge, we know that in general it’s hard for someone to test his/her own work, which is why quality programs ordinarily include independent QA/testing by people with relevant skills and knowledge. Since the user is ordinarily the source of the requirements, it’s hard for the user to recognize when s/he is incorrect; and the typical review question, “What did you leave out?” is highly unlikely to yield recognition of significant oversights.

By the way, similar factors can limit business analysts’ ability to objectively evaluate their own effectiveness—or that of a BOK capturing their dictation of their own presumed best practices, models, and methods.

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Some organizations involve others in addition to users in requirements reviews. Regardless of whether these other reviewers are managers, other analysts, or QA, they may lack sufficient subject area knowledge to find significant requirements content issues. Moreover, it's seldom recognized but very common that those performing requirements reviews, especially users, really don't know what to do, how to do it, or how to tell how well they've done it. Nonetheless, they and their organizations almost always seem certain their reviews are sufficient for reliance, aren't they?

In contrast, my seminars on *Reviewing Requirements and Design Adequacy* and my book, *Discovering REAL Business Requirements for Software Project Success*, describe more than 21 ways to evaluate requirements. These 21+ methods include the well-known but relatively weak ways to address format issues, such as checking ambiguity/clarity and testability; and the 21+ ways also include many more powerful special techniques that do better enable spotting overlooked and incorrect requirements content issues; but few organizations know these ways, and BABOK is oblivious to them. Shouldn't "best practices" recognize review methods that find content as well as format issues?

But Wait, There's Something Even More Insidious

Not only are the common and prescribed elicitation practices likely to be merely taking dictation, but they're also probably not addressing the REAL requirements.

Remember, business analysis generally is described as starting with:

Eliciting from the business users the requirements of the product or system they feel will meet their business needs.

If business analysis starts with eliciting product or system requirements, how exactly do we find out about the business needs the product/system is supposed to meet? Quite simply, common business analysis depictions pretty much ignore the identification of business needs, either taking them for granted or expecting them to be dictated by management with none of the (even pretense of) analysis presumed to be occurring with requirements elicitation/dictation.

BABOK's authors undoubtedly would say that business needs are identified during Enterprise Analysis; but that explanation is also problematic for a number of reasons.

First, BABOK is quite explicit that Enterprise Analysis is a Knowledge Area, not a life cycle phase. Yet, everything about its treatment implies that Enterprise Analysis is performed prior to and separate from the Elicitation and Requirements Analysis Knowledge Area activities, which sure sounds like a life cycle phase to me.

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Unfortunately there's no assurance an organization or project actually will perform explicit Enterprise Analysis, and many don't. If the identification of business needs has been skipped, then business analysts can only be eliciting and analyzing requirements for products and systems which apparently have no identified business needs to meet.

Second, despite the presence of the word "analysis" in its name and one or two oblique references in other BABOK sections, the description of Enterprise Analysis hardly even hints that elicitation and analysis (there's that A-word again) are essential Enterprise Analysis activities. As such, even when performed explicitly, Enterprise Analysis as described is essentially merely taking dictation of (apparently unelicited) management pronouncements about business needs.

Third, what BABOK calls "business requirements," mainly goals and objectives, is not sufficient to base a product/system on. Moreover, BABOK's whole requirements model, which considers goal/objective business requirements to be high-level and other types of requirements to represent lower levels, is fundamentally flawed.

REAL business requirements are business deliverable *whats* that when delivered provide value by achieving the goals and objectives. REAL business requirements are not just high-level but need to be defined in detail. No matter how far down in detail they go, they are always business deliverable *whats* that provide value when satisfied. In contrast, product/system/software requirements (which BABOK mainly deals with) are high-level design of *how* to accomplish/satisfy the REAL business requirements. For a more extensive explanation, see my book or my February 13, 2007 Requirements Networking Group featured article, "Conventional Requirements Model Flaw Misses REAL Business Requirements," at <http://www.requirementsnetwork.com/node/683>).

Business Analysis Should Involve More

The primary and most meaningful real value business analysis should provide is identifying the REAL business needs, which involve a lot more than BABOK's simplistic portrayal and take professional skilled analysis, not just clerical skills, to identify. Identifying REAL business needs includes first accurately discovering the REAL problem/opportunity/challenge that will provide REAL value when solved/taken/met.

Key to getting the problem etc. right are two sets of measures which must quantify both tangibles and intangibles. The current measures tell us we have a problem. The goal measures tell us that the problem has been solved and result in achieving the benefit or value, which is measured by the difference between current and goal measures. These are the goals and objectives. They are necessary for, and can only be defined relevantly in conjunction with, identifying the REAL problem.

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The next part of defining business needs is identifying the causes of the problem. One doesn't solve a problem directly. Rather, one must identify and then appropriately address the problem's causes.

The final aspect of defining business needs is discovering the REAL, business requirements deliverable *whats* which will achieve the goal measures and thereby provide value when accomplished by some product or system solution *how*. Together, these five elements ordinarily are enormously difficult to get right. They usually are not well understood or easily evident. One surely cannot rely on dictation to discover them.

The powerful Problem Pyramid™ tool described in my book, articles, speeches and seminars provides a disciplined way to help get the problem, measures, causes, and REAL business requirements—in short, the REAL business needs—right. The tool doesn't work by itself. It takes training, subject area knowledge, analytical and elicitation skills, and guided practice.

The business analyst needs to do constant analysis, thinking and questioning continually in conjunction with elicitation, which really needs to be a lot more discovery than merely prompting dictation to capture. Furthermore, actively intertwined elicitation/discovery plus analysis need to be ongoing throughout the project, not just a one-time event.

For me, this is the most creatively challenging and rewarding part of business analysis. **It's also the most important and yet least well-performed part of most projects.**

In fact, in many if not most organizations, it doesn't matter that business analysts following BABOK-type largely clerical dictation-taking processes won't discover the REAL business needs. *They're probably working on a project which senior management already has destined to failure before business analysts even become involved.*

That's because senior management often presumes their position alone imbues necessary knowledge and judgment to identify and prioritize projects appropriately, nay brilliantly. All those project failures have to be due to the dullards below them, right? What's the common element? Title and level alone are not enough. REAL business analysis is needed; but most senior management doesn't know it's needed or how to do it.

Failure is almost certain when projects are initiated to implement presumed product/system solution *hows* without adequately identifying the REAL problem/opportunity/challenge, measures and quantified value, causes, and REAL business requirements deliverable *whats* that will achieve the goal measures and thereby provide the value. Management mandate doesn't make something a REAL business requirement. Providing REAL value does.

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BABOK does endeavor to address getting projects off on the right foot through Enterprise Analysis, the separate Knowledge Area charged with identifying business needs and mainly involving explicit feasibility analysis and formal project identification/prioritization methods.

While valuable activities that many organizations could benefit from using more effectively and extensively, in practice many organizations don't use these techniques at all; and those that do often use them poorly and only for a fraction of their projects, typically the ones they expect to be larger. (Of course, nothing turns a project into a large one quicker than the creep which results inevitably from not adequately defining the REAL business needs.)

Indeed, business analysts should be performing feasibility analysis and other project identification/initiation activities; but one should not fall into BABOK's trap of suggesting these are the only place where business needs are identified, even when the organization does perform them explicitly.

Adequately defined REAL business requirements are essential for success of all projects. Discovering them is the primary value and should be the primary activity of business analysis in all projects, both those with and without separate Enterprise Analysis. That takes skilled professional analysis. Merely taking clerical dictation won't suffice.

About the Author



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Previously he was a developer, systems programmer/DBA/QA, and project leader with the City of Cleveland, leading financial institutions, and a “Big 4” consulting firm.

Author of the Proactive Testing™ risk-based methodology for delivering better software quicker *and* cheaper, numerous articles, and the recent Artech House book *Discovering REAL Business Requirements for Software Project Success*, and a frequent featured speaker at leading professional conferences, he was formerly International Vice President of the Association for Systems Management and Executive Editor of the *Journal of Systems Management*. He was Founding Chairman of the New England Center for Organizational Effectiveness. He belongs to the Boston SPIN and served on the SEPG’95 Planning and Program Committees.

Mr. Goldsmith Chaired attendance-record-setting BOSCON 2000 and 2001, ASQ Boston Section’s Annual Quality Conferences, and was a member of the ASQ Software Division Methods Committee and the IEEE Software Test Documentation Std. 829-2008 revision Committee. He is a member of the Advisory Boards for the International Institute for Software Testing (IIST) and for the International Institute for Software Process (IISP). He is an International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA) Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABOK) reviewer and subject expert.

He holds the following degrees: Kenyon College, A.B. with Honors in Psychology; Pennsylvania State University, M.S. in Psychology; Suffolk University, J.D.; Boston University, LL.M. in Tax Law. Mr. Goldsmith is a member of the Massachusetts Bar and licensed to practice law in Massachusetts.