Getting the Most Out of Your Business Analysts and Business Architects
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Adam McClellan, Project Management Professional, Six-Sigma Greenbelt, Certified ScrumMaster

Introduction

The business analyst and business architect roles are growing in enterprises around the globe. Each provides bountiful opportunities to build strong, active, analytical doers who can shape the present and future course of an organization. However, the roles often struggle for traction. Business analysts all too often are cast as the project manager’s sidekick, responsible for wading through details to meet project-focused schedule and scope objectives that may fall short of an organization’s vision. And business architects frequently find themselves operating in a mid-level limbo, modeling the business and its direction but unable to effectively influence their organization.

How can you counter this wasted potential? At a high level, start with this:

1. **Conceptual alignment**: make clear for architects, analysts, and the organization as a whole how each role’s work aligns with the others’, and how both roles drive the organization forward

2. **Organizational structure**: place your architects and analysts in positions where they will not only reinforce each other’s work, but where they’re empowered to bring solution-focused leadership skills to bear

3. **Enculturation**: encourage forward enterprise thinking not only among your analysts and architects, but across the organization as a whole

4. **Tooling**: enable architects’ and analysts’ work as they elicit, analyze, and model desired business outcomes. Make the work products transparent and accessible to stakeholders throughout the enterprise.

5. **Career pathing**: delineate a path for analysts and architects upward through your organization. Better yet, make a stint as an analyst or architect a favored stop for the ambitious.

6. **Training**: inculcate in your analysts and architects an ability to synthesize and manage details, the intuition to pinpoint key organizational trends, and the soft skills to operate effectively within the organization

Conceptual Alignment

Organizations generally get the fact that both business architects and business analysts operate by abstracting and modeling the business to help drive it to a desired future state. But it’s not always clear what differentiates the two roles. You can get a great deal of clarity by positioning each role against its systems counterpart.
Business Analysis vs. Systems Analysis

One of the classic blurred lines in the project space is the area separating the work of the business and systems analysts. For that matter, depending on the scope of the project and size of the organization, the two roles may be performed by the same person. (Or, suboptimally, they can be blurred so badly that the distinction between business needs, functional requirements, and system specifications is unclear to stakeholders.)

There’s a lot of justification for the confusion. Both roles focus on outlining the details of a given technical solution, and the scope of their work is typically bounded by the scope of a project – or, less often, a program. And both are ultimately responsible for driving to a solution that delivers the business value promised by a project. The value that each role brings to an initiative and to the enterprise should differ significantly when executed well. While each role should remain aware of the activities of the other, their focuses should differ.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Analyst</th>
<th>Systems Analyst</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Takes the business problem under consideration and focuses on describing a solution that addresses it</td>
<td>Reviews the solution description and outlines an approach for fulfilling it through one or more specific systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creates a set of system-neutral requirements that describe a full solution for the business</td>
<td>Creates platform-specific specifications that describe how a technology component will be used to deliver part or all of a business solution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outlines solution components that may not be met through technology</td>
<td>Focuses primarily if not entirely on the technical components of the solution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should be primarily guided by the long-term business vision of the enterprise</td>
<td>Should be primarily guided by the technical architectural direction of the enterprise</td>
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Business Architecture vs. Systems Architecture

The systems architect is the more established of these two roles. However, the role of the business architect has begun its emergence into the spotlight as organizations start to understand the importance of actively managing their business complexity in the same way they do their systems.

Both roles are responsible for contributing to and driving towards an enterprise’s architectural vision, however well or poorly articulated it may be. But the specifics of how they drive to that vision differ.
Business Architect System Architect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Architect</th>
<th>Systems Architect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work with executives and other leaders to define direction for the enterprise and the groups that constitute it</td>
<td>Work with IT leadership to define the most appropriate technical approach for achieving enterprise goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop and maintain enterprise capability model</td>
<td>Ensure that enterprise systems are constructed in a way that enables delivery of needed business capabilities and functionality on an ongoing basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare current state capabilities to desired future state, and identify initiatives to drive the enterprise there</td>
<td>Engage on project and program work to facilitate the technological enablement of desired business capabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remain attendant to larger economic and industry trends impacting the enterprise</td>
<td>Remain responsive to technological innovation and evolution as it impacts the enterprise</td>
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**Business Analysis vs. Business Architecture**

As you begin to see above, these two roles are both business-focused and technologically aware, but the purviews of each are fundamentally different. The analyst is focused on the specifics of an initiative, while the architect lives in the broader brushstrokes of strategic and enterprise thinking.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Analyst</th>
<th>Business Architect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work on one or more projects, focusing on the development of business and functional requirements</td>
<td>Work with executives and other leaders in and across functional areas to develop strategic and tactical direction for an organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities begin during project discovery and tail off around “go-live”</td>
<td>Project-related activities begin during project ideation and tail off at the end of discovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts are generally focused on the desired end state for a specific project or program</td>
<td>Artifacts represent current and future states for part or whole of the organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note, however, that each has to be attentive to the other’s space in order to be effective. Business analysts who are unaware of the value of their project and the organization’s broader direction are likely to drive their projects into a ditch. And equally important, business architects who cannot speak to and interpret the “weedy” details of their organization lack credibility and will struggle to implement the visions they sketch for enterprise leaders.

In addition, organizations that move from in-house development to implementing vendor solutions may start to see a convergence of these roles. As business analysts spend less time outlining the desired behavior of a system, they will likely spend more time focusing on a detailed understanding of business functions and needs, and of how the solution being implemented drives the organization towards its vision. This, of course, is the business architect’s playground.
Organizational Structure

Enterprises struggle to find the right placement for architects and analysts. Both roles often land in IT, despite their “business” focus. And both are prone to reside in organizational structures that underutilize the skills and insights that they could gain through their work.

Analysts within the organization

Organizations typically have at least a portion of their business analysts distributed throughout the enterprise, where they can both support business operations and develop subject matter expertise. In addition, many create a centralized pool of analysts who can be used for large-scale initiatives that touch multiple parts of the business.

This distribution results in an interesting dichotomy. The business-embedded analysts assemble a tremendous body of knowledge regarding current operations and system details, such that they are constantly at risk of morphing into business subject matter experts (SMEs). The centralized analysts develop a view of the enterprise in its breadth and hone their analytical skills on challenging projects. However, they may struggle to understand the true operational impacts of a given project.

In addition, the majority of the analysts within a company wind up reporting to managers who are focused either on project delivery or on day-to-day organizational operations. Neither is likely to encourage the type of enterprise thinking and analytical skill-building that’s necessary to creating truly excellent analysts.

Architects within the organization

Business architects have a similar distribution across organizations. Some are business embeds, focused on improving the operations of a given vertical. Others, more centralized, work to flesh out enterprise strategy and interpret its application across the organization.

The relative newness of the business architecture role results in a wide range of interpretations, sometimes within the same organization. Job responsibilities may be unclear; in addition, architects are often tacked onto existing organizational structures without enough thought given to how to empower them to enact the change they help articulate.

Analysts in relation to architects

There’s a natural solution to these problems, which is to place business architects and business analysts in the same group – and, in some cases, with the analysts reporting to the architects. At least a core of these employees should, furthermore, report up to an executive who is responsible for guiding the organization towards its long-term vision.
Here are the key benefits that flow from this arrangement:

1. Analysts remain in close communication with and accountable to leaders who are intimately familiar with the organization’s strategic and tactical goals.
2. Analysts have managers who understand analytical roles and can effectively guide them upward along their career paths.
3. Architects have resources at their disposal who can ensure that project work drives towards the enterprise vision and doesn’t fall captive to business owner preferences.
4. Architects also have resources who will be able to articulate the practical consequences and challenges of the visions they espouse, and avoid “academic” modeling.
5. Executives get an integrated team that can speak to the business as a whole, from low-level detail to high-level vision.

In the absence of this type of organization structure, it’s at least worth setting up a community of practice that includes both roles. The benefits from this approach won’t be as full, but the organization will still see benefits from giving people in these roles the opportunity to exchange information and insights.

**Enculturation**

Placing business architects and business analysts in the right organization structure is only one part of the equation. Equally important is building a culture that values the analytical, results-driven, future-minded work that they do.

**Everyone’s an enterprise thinker!**

Enterprise thinking, simply put, is the practice of considering the entire enterprise in decision-making, not just a given group or department. This style of thinking makes the organization both leaner and more agile: lean by reducing the waste and inefficiencies that come from blinkered and siloed thinking; agile by increasing everyone’s understanding of enterprise goals, vision, and functions.

Enterprise thinking is the corporate version of apple pie. Everybody’s for it! And, without a doubt, there’s a tremendous amount of value to be gained from pushing for an enterprise mindset.

**But not really…**

However, the fact is that an enterprise mindset is difficult to maintain in most operational and tactical roles. The immediacy of problems combined with the complexity of the enterprise drive people to solutions that they know, understand, and can implement quickly. And those solutions are most often the ones in the small areas under their immediate control.

Not only that, but corporate incentive structures rarely are purely enterprise-driven. Most have at least a partial component that ties to departmental or divisional goals being met. And to state the obvious: people will do what they are incented to do. The upshot is that enterprise thinking is widely praised in theory, but inconsistently rewarded in practice.
Putting architects and analysts in the lead

So what can you do to bolster enterprise thinking? Increase, empower, and embolden the people whose jobs require it.

For the practices at the heart of this white paper, that means building a corps of business architects and business analysts who can embody the benefits of enterprise thinking.

To make enterprise thinking real and beneficial for the larger organization, this community needs to

1. Be knowledgeable about the business and how it functions so that their perspective and guidance has credibility
2. Respond to issues and questions quickly and in practical terms, to demonstrate that enterprise thinking has concrete, positive consequences and isn’t an "academic" exercise
3. Share their knowledge broadly, so that the organization as a whole can benefit and draw its own insights, and so the group doesn’t become its own silo
4. Have access to resources throughout the company, from individual contributor to C-level

Failure on any one of these points will marginalize the group and hamper its effectiveness.

Tooling

Tooling discussions are often driven by hype on the side of those pushing tool sales and adoption, and by angst on the part of those who prefer working with the platform they’re most familiar with. But this dynamic shouldn’t obscure the fact that a good toolset is key to getting the most value out of your analysts and architects.

There is no one tool

Unsurprisingly, there’s no single answer to an organization’s analytical and architectural tooling needs. Get comfortable not only with the multiplicity of options that are out there, but with the fact that your organization is highly likely to use more than one application to support its project and enterprise modeling efforts.

Done well, this isn’t a bad thing – quite the contrary. Just make sure you’ve got your eyes open all the way through. Keep the following in mind:

1. **Consider multiple solutions:** Understand going in that you’re looking for a toolset, not a silver bullet. And you won’t know it by gut; your modeling and analysis needs are more complex than that. Look at all the options and home in on the ones that are most promising for you.
2. **Evaluate your current toolset along with others:** When chasing the bright, shiny object of a new tool, it’s easy to overlook or depreciate the set of tools you already have. Keep in mind that there’s at least some utility in your existing toolset, and use it as a baseline for evaluating other tools.
3. **Articulate a strategy and vision for tool usage:** Even the best tool can’t roll itself out or facilitate its own adoption. That bit of heavy lifting falls to you. Work with the architects and analysts in your organization to articulate what you want your tooling solution to enable. Pay particular mind to difference in needs and usage patterns in different parts of the enterprise.
There are good tools and bad tools

The quality of analysis and modeling tools varies widely. Not only that, but what’s a great tool for one organization may be thoroughly mediocre for another. As you select and re-evaluate your toolset, be sure that you’ve clearly articulated your organization’s requirements for that toolset. Otherwise, you run the risk of choosing a tool that undermines your practice rather than furthering it.

That being said, there are still key high-level capabilities that are desirable for most analyses and modeling tools in most organizations:

1. **Transparency**: Look for a toolset that will make your models and requirements available throughout a broad swath of the enterprise – ideally, enterprise-wide.
2. **Accessibility**: The more easily grasped your tools and work products are, the more engaged the non-analyst/architect part of the organization will be in what you do.
3. **Intelligence**: Organizations are terrifically complex. A good modeling tool will allow you to build wide-ranging representations of the enterprise, but then filter to a much more specific view based on capabilities, systems, or timeframes of interest.
4. **Integration**: Discrete, one-off models die. Look for a solution that allows you to tie modeling work together across the enterprise on an ongoing basis.
5. **Flexibility**: Shortly after you implement your new toolset, you’ll inevitably encounter a new modeling technique that you want to play around with. You’ll want your toolset to be able to accommodate it, along with other innovations that sprout up over time.

Note that this is a general outline of tool characteristics – not a free pass for avoiding the hard work of gathering requirements for your analysis tool. Keep in mind that the needs of your organization will determine the specifics around each capability as well as its priority.

Career Pathing

Business architect and business analyst roles often sit as outliers or side paths within an organization’s career ladder. That’s a state of affairs that sells the organization short by wasting the tremendous volume of business knowledge and insight that these roles gain during their tenure. It also can frustrate and demoralize those architects and analysts who aspire to high-level roles within the organization.

Mark clear entry points

Don’t just let analysts and architects happen. Instead, recruit for the roles. Look for people both inside and outside the organization who

1. Communicate well
2. Do well with both quick thinking and deep thought
3. Focus on driving to solutions
4. Can both collaborate and keep themselves on task

Cultivate these people. Funnel them into business analyst and business architect roles. And give them a clear path upward.
Set distinct but interrelated paths

There’s a natural progression for both of these roles, which involves taking on more and more challenging and complex work, and being able to speak to an ever-growing portion of the enterprise. In addition, as people progress within the role, they’ll improve their ability to synthesize and abstract and to understand the direction of the organization as a whole. However, you should resist the temptation to make business architect the capstone of the business analyst’s career progression within your organization.

You should expect a considerable amount of flow between the roles. However, it’s also the case that some business analysts will prefer to stay in roles where their hands remain consistently in the details, rather than rising to the more tactical and strategic analysis levels more common to business architects. That’s not only fine, but desirable – the enterprise needs skilled thinkers who enjoy the granular life.

The reverse of this is more problematic, however. While business architects don’t live in the details, they must be able to speak to them comprehensively when needed, and to identify how small, granular items can have large, enterprise-wide consequences. As such, a stint as a business analyst and mastery of the business analyst toolset can go a long way towards helping a business architect build and maintain their credibility. Make sure that your architects either have served as business analysts or can do a convincing impersonation of someone who has.

Make clear that the roles are suitable for any career stage

Finally, make sure that people throughout the organization not only see these roles as important to the enterprise, but as potentially valuable stopping points on their own career paths.

1. **Entry-level and young professional**: The business analyst role is one of the best ways for starter employees to learn about a portion of the organization in depth, and to gain an understanding of the organization’s broader functions. During this stage, involvement in business architecture activities can serve as a great introduction to strategic thinking and planning.

2. **Mid-career**: People with several years of experience on their resumes can bring considerable perspective and knowledge to the business analyst role; it also allows them to get a broader view of how the organization functions. And the business architect role can allow mid-career employees with strong analytical and soft skills to engage with the difficult work of departmental, divisional, and enterprise visioning, modeling, and planning.

3. **Experienced professional**: Both roles are natural channels for the knowledge and experience that decades in the workplace can bring. In turn, the complexity and change that these roles must manage will continue to provide challenges and growth for your most seasoned employees.

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About the Author

Adam McClellan has over a decade of experience as a project professional, including multiple stints as a business architect and business analyst. As a Project Management Professional, Certified ScrumMaster, and Six-Sigma Greenbelt, he brings a combined focus on high-quality solutions and timely delivery to his work and has experienced first-hand the valuable knowledge and enlightening conversations to be had at all levels of an organization.

The philosophy at the heart of Adam’s approach to work can be summed as

1. Know the problem you’re trying to solve.
2. The solution may be simpler than it looks.
3. If you think every solution is simple, you’re fooling yourself.
4. Always keep driving to a solution.

Adam lives with his family in Durham, North Carolina, where he operates his consulting practice, Brightrope.