Evolving Role of a Business Analyst

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Abstract: Projects are the framework in which new products, enhancements, migrations, legislation changes, upgrades delivered into an organization and its product offerings. Various methodologies are employed to deliver projects. The agile way of working, has provided an avenue in which organizations have been able to streamline their project deliveries, allowing companies to get to market more quickly and efficiently. Organizations have attempted to align themselves with the agile delivery framework, and with that comes its challenges. At the heart of this alignment is the differing roles and responsibilities that need to be supported by key project team members. Business analysts are at the heart of these key project team members that have seen a need to evolve and embrace a new way of working, in order, to support the agile way of working, with differing objectives and deliverables.

Key words: *Agile, business analysis, project, delivery framework*

INTRODUCTION

Project's play a critical role in today's organizations. They are the framework in which new products, enhancements, migrations, legislation changes, upgrades delivered into an organization and its product offerings. As defined in the BABOK [1], a project is 'a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service or result'. Various methodologies are employed to deliver projects. Traditionally a waterfall project methodology has been used by organizations. However more recently with the prevalence of the digital age and the need to get to market quickly, the agile project methodology is become the more popular framework. Organizations have attempted to align themselves with the agile delivery framework, and with that comes its challenges. At the heart of this alignment is the differing roles and responsibilities that need to be supported by key project team members. Business analysts are at the heart of these key project team members that have seen a need to evolve and embrace a new way of working, in order, to support the agile way of working, with differing objectives and deliverables.

The aim of this manuscript is to review the changing role of a business analyst in today's changing project landscape. To begin we will introduce the Agile Manifesto and discuss the impact it has had on today's organizations. The need to deliver project solutions to market quickly, efficiently and in smaller delivery chunks has had a huge impact on the success of the agile framework. As such it is important for us to review twelve of the core principles that make up the agile way of working. We will then review key elements of agile delivery and what this means for the business analyst. What working as a business analyst has meant will be reviewed, followed by the business analyst role and how it has evolved to exist in the agile world. This will be followed by a quick introduction of a few of the key concepts that impact the business analyst and how they operate in an agile framework.

AGILE MANIFESTO

It is important to understand the progressive shift in mindset that has occur in today's organisations. The founders of the agile manifesto realised this, and attempted to capture the very essence of this shift in what is now famously referred to as the Agile Manifesto [2]. The Agile Manifesto supports four key values:

1. Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
2. Working software over comprehensive documentation
3. Customer collaboration over contract negotiation

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4. Responding to change over following a plan [2]

The Agile Manifesto, initially defined as a framework for software development, has evolved considerably. It worked so well, providing a framework in which projects could be delivered to market quickly and more efficiently, that non-software projects began to embrace this new way of working. The agile manifesto, although initially a manifesto to support agile software development has morphed into a delivery framework for projects in general, that is supported and embraced by IT and non-IT projects.

The success of project delivery is a core dependency of an organisations' ability to grow, develop and to some extent even survive in the competitive world market place. It is through projects that we create improved business processes and new products and services as a response to changes in the business environment [3]. The digital age brought with it new opportunities, and boundary less access to multiple market places. However, with some a large market place and potential customer-base, comes with it challenges around the ability for an organisation to stay abreast with the latest legislative changes, market vibe and most importantly the ability, particularly for large organisation's to be versatile and quick to embrace the new way of working in the online, real-time market place.

A key challenge that many organisations faced, is how to get to market quickly and efficiently, whilst still maintaining key project milestones and approval gates. At the heart of this dilemma is how to remain relevant and cutting edge, with the overhead of volume and scale.

The agile way of working, has provided an avenue in which organisations have been able to streamline their project deliveries, allowing companies to get to market more quickly and efficiently. Therefore, although the core principles of the agile manifesto are defined for software development, they have been eagerly embraced, and provide the core principles and foundations upon which non-software development projects are delivered.

The core principles that comprise the agile manifesto are defined in [2] as follows:
1. Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software.
2. Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage.
3. Deliver working software frequently, from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, with a preference to the shorter timescale.
4. Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
5. Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.
6. The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.
7. Working software is the primary measure of progress.
8. Agile processes promote sustainable development. The sponsors, developers, and users should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely.
9. Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.
10. Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential.
11. The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.
12. At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behaviour accordingly.

PROJECT ELEMENTS

The advent of the agile manifesto and its popularity as a framework by which projects can be delivered, has a very simplified and effective approach to how all elements of project work can be managed. Key elements of project work can be summarized as cost, customers, quality, risk, scope and time. Let us now look briefly at each of these key elements of project work and how agile helps manage these elements of work.

Cost is one of the most critical elements of project delivery. It has a very real impact on a company's bottom line, and will potentially mean whether a product, service or result is in fact a viable investment for the company. As such costs are important to maintain and keep at their minimum. The way in which agile projects are run, means it has the desired effect of ensuring that implementation costs are lower and benefits are returned earlier.

Customers as an element in this agile context, is referring to those people that are engaged as customers from a project perspective, i.e. the end users or consumers of the product. Customers need

to be engaged throughout the duration of the project work, to ensure the right solution is ultimately implemented.

Quality is another key element of the agile project delivery framework, at the heart of the agile way of worker is the attempt to deliver products, services and results to market quicker and more efficiently, however it must ensure that quality is built into the work process, to ensure that quality is maintained and not compromised.

Risk is another important element of the agile project delivery framework. Similarly, to the quality element, to get products, services and results to market quicker and more efficiently, it is imperative that risk is managed. In agile delivery one finds that due to the solution being delivered in smaller iterative parts, the risk of implementing the solution is reduced and continual learning can be applied upon subsequent iterations.

Scope is an important aspect of any project delivery framework, and agile is no exception to this. Scope is managed through the product backlog and in doing so, it ensures that the highest priority scope items are delivered first (where ever feasibly possible) to enable benefits to be realized at their earliest.

Time is another important element of the agile project delivery framework. Due to the smaller iterative nature of solution delivery supported by the agile framework, it has the desired effect of ensuring that solutions can be implemented sooner and quicker to customers.

ROLE OF A BUSINESS ANALYST

As defined in [1], business analysis is the practice of enabling change in an enterprise by defining needs and recommending solutions that deliver value to stakeholders. The business analyst is traditionally seen as the conduit between the business, project and IT teams. As discussed in [4], the role of a Business Analyst is that of a person acting as a bridge or link to interpret, analyses and translate between what is typically referred to as the Business group in the organization and the Technology teams. Also, as described in [5], business analysts are the pivotal points in providing these perspectives and aligning business goals with investment in technology. The role of the business analyst can be quite varied and all encompassing, as the business analyst is the link in the organizations core framework, as succinctly phrased in [4], the business analyst is the link between the requirements (the client) and the software solution (the development team).

At its most fundamental level, the roles and responsibilities of a business analyst are about

moving the organization forward and making it better [7]. In a traditional waterfall approach to project delivery, there are distinct project phases. These phases generally are defined as:

1. Initiation Phase
2. Analysis Phase
3. Design Phase
4. Build Phase
5. Test Phase
6. Implementation and Support Phase

The role of the business analyst is quite unique, in that, during each of these traditional project phases, the business analyst has a distinct role and associated responsibilities. The expected roles of the business analyst at different phases of the project, have been reviewed in [4] and are discussed in detail in the BABOK [1].

In summary, the business analyst plays a role in aligning the designed and delivered solutions with the needs of stakeholders, as discussed in [1], the activities that business analysts perform include:

- Understanding enterprise problems and goals
- Analysing needs and solutions
- Devising strategies
- Driving change, and
- Facilitating stakeholder collaboration

As can be seen from the above, the role of the business analyst is more than just about requirements, it is much broader and far more reaching across the organization. The business analyst, therefore plays a critical role in the success of a project's delivery. As highlighted in [7], knowing the roles and responsibilities of a business analyst will help you establish the conditions for an organization to continually improve and achieve its goals.

As highlighted in [3], it is through the leadership of the business analyst that requirements are captured and fully understood by the technical team before solutions are designed and implemented. The business analyst serves as the liaison between the business community and the technical solution providers throughout the project life cycle. However, what does this mean in the agile world. Let us know look briefly look at what it means to embrace the agile way of working.

WORKING WITH AGILE

The need to get quality new products and enhancements to market quickly and seamlessly to customers brings with it, it's challenges. No more, than, in the way that business analysts need to work in the ever-changing project landscape. Today's

organisations have embraced with vigour, the agile manifesto, a framework for delivering quality deliverables, quickly and efficiently in smaller iterations to market.

With many organisations trending away from the traditional waterfall framework and leaning towards a more agile framework, the BA's responsibilities although remain predominantly the same, the emphasis has evolved to a different set of tasks and deliverables that are unique to the agile way of working.

Agile has had a sweeping impact on today's organizations. Waterfall is quickly becoming an obsolete project delivery framework. This is seen particularly within the financial services sector, where companies need to remain up-to-date with the latest cutting edge technologies in-order to stay competitive. For those project team members that previously worked in a waterfall framework, they are finding themselves evolving along with their organizations into an agile framework. Transitioning away from a well-known project delivery framework brings with it new challenges, particularly for those who remember the old. These challenges not only include a new way of working but also just as importantly, a new set of terminology that is used to describe the agile path to project delivery.

As described in [8], the business analyst's role may become more demanding in terms of delivering the requirements, rather than just documenting requirements in a traditional world. Business analysts build collaboration capabilities which revolve around empathetic communication and crisp articulation.

This new way of working brings with it concepts, deliverables, as well as differing facets of project roles, deliverables, through the very nature of the framework itself. delivery projects, concepts and deliverables that can feel almost like listening to a foreign language. As highlighted in [9], efficient and effective business analysis practices are essential throughout the agile process, as at each delivery cycle, you need to validate and evolve the product, ensuring that the product is evolving and delivering its expected value and in the expected direction. In an agile approach to projects, although the project delivery can be a product, service or result, all deliverables are perceived or referred to as a product. As defined in [9], a product is made up of product options (or requirements), as expressed in stories, text descriptions, and so on. Each product option presents benefits and risks, and the partners assess these as part of determining the option's value. In the agile world, business analysis helps to validate

and accelerate the validation process. Whereas in a waterfall setting, this validation comes at the end of the project, albeit way too late to do anything about, if it's off track and no longer meets the business need of objectives.

Due to this different approach, the skills of the business analyst in an agile world has evolved in its focus. Its focus, as described in [8], is on achieving outcomes which deliver business impact, rather than generate outputs which define business requirements.

AGILE ELEMENTS

However, the question becomes how is this achievable for a business analyst? This can be answered through some of the key elements that make up the agile way of working. Working as a business analyst in an agile project delivery framework requires the business analyst to learn the practices and apply them. However, it is not simply the application of these practices, it is also the mindset and principles that need to embrace agile, that will ensure that a business analyst can be successful on an agile project.

A product backlog is used to prioritize the work that is outstanding. As described in [10], the product backlog in agile is a prioritized features list, containing short descriptions and acceptance criteria, of all the functionality desired in the software product known at the time. The product backlog will be managed by the product owner or business analyst, and is a living artefact that will continue to evolve, as the iterations progress and business priorities change during the project.

Once a backlog item is selected for an iteration, it will be over to the business analyst to specify. No longer is there a need for those large cumbersome business requirement and functional requirement documentations. Instead, to elaborate on requirements that need to be built in small iterative components, business analysts will tend to write use cases. Use Cases are an end to end sequence of interactions that occur between an actor and a system, with the outcome being an observable result or value. A use case consists of a main flow, with several alternate and exception flows.

The use cases are handed over, or walked through with the main key stakeholders, which will involve the product owner, developers and testers. At this point of the iteration, the work will almost resemble a mini waterfall project, in that the developers will commence work on the use cases, if any questions arise they will consult the business analyst. The exception being that during

development they will continually get buy-in from the business analyst and product owner, to ensure that the development is meeting the expected objectives.

At the end of an iteration, there are two key elements of the agile delivery framework that are important to the business analyst. These include the concept of a showcase and a retrospective.

A showcase, as the word suggests, a chance to display features that have been worked on. A showcase is traditionally performed at the end of an iteration. Giving the project team an opportunity to showcase the features that have been successfully worked on during that iteration, the main intended audience of the showcase is the product owner and other stakeholders. However, the showcase can be expanded to also include other project team members.

A retrospective, or retro, as it is more commonly referred to by agile teams, is another end of iteration activity that allows the project team a chance to reflect on the work that has been done during the iteration, with emphasis on three key themes: what worked well? what hasn't worked well? what is puzzling? A retro provides an avenue by which project team members, including the business analyst, can discuss the project, how it is going, and identified ways of improvement. This is unique to the agile world, over a waterfall approach, in the agile world, there is the opportunity to learn after each iteration, whereas in the waterfall approach, the learnings come in the form of a PIR (Post Implementation Review) at the end of the project, which are too late for the current project. As highlighted in [11], agile offers the opportunity for business analysis to benefit from the frequent feedback provided by the business.

Notwithstanding, it is important to note that key personal skills required of a business analyst remain unchanged within an agile framework. The business analyst as detailed in [12], must be great verbal and written communicators, tactful diplomats, problem solvers, thinkers and analyzers with the ability to engage with stakeholders to understand and respond to their needs in rapidly changing business environments. This can often involve dealing with very senior stakeholders and can often involve challenging and questioning to ensure that value for money is achieved from IT developments. The business analyst still needs to operate like a communication bridge as highlighted in [12], that bridges the divide between IT and business stakeholders.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

In drawing this manuscript to a conclusion, due to the prevalence of digital and online medium, it is important for organizations to be able to deliver their new and updated products and services to market quickly. The waterfall methodology unfortunately was too cumbersome and sequential to facilitate this. Hence the new kid on the market, the agile way of working, provided the idea project delivery framework that allows organizations to deliver smaller chunks of solutions to market quickly, more efficiently, while keeping a tight control over the key project elements of cost, risk, quality, scope, and time.

Organizations have attempted to align themselves with the agile delivery framework, and with that comes its challenges. At the heart of this alignment is the differing roles and responsibilities that need to be supported by key project team members. The focus of this manuscript has been the role of business analysts.

As highlighted earlier in the manuscript, the role of the business analyst is quite unique, in that, during each of the traditional project phases in a waterfall framework, the business analyst has distinct roles and associated responsibilities. Due to this different approach, the skills of the business analyst in an agile world has evolved in its focus.

As has been shown in this manuscript, the agile framework, although slow initially to be embraced, has now evolved to quickly be the most commonly used project delivery framework in today's organizations. The agile framework allows for a differing mindset. A mindset that is focused on growth and delivery, in short manageable components. Working as a business analyst in an agile project delivery framework requires the business analyst to learn the practices and apply them. As we have seen earlier in this manuscript, the business analyst plays an important role in the delivery of a project. Within the agile framework, a new way of working needs to be embraced and differing deliverables need to be worked on by the business analyst to support the ability to deliver smaller chunks of the solution to market quicker and more effectively and efficiently. As discussed earlier in this paper, the key elements that the business analyst has, to implement this, is by defining requirements using Use Cases, as well as being active participants in retros and showcases. The soft skills that were previously required of a business analyst still prevail, as they form the foundation upon which a good business analyst regardless of the project delivery framework, can perform they role competently.

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