

WHAT SHOULD YOU EXPECT FROM YOUR BUSINESS ANALYST?

The business analyst job description is very broad. It covers any number of tasks ranging from collecting smartphone customer preferences to designing major IT data centers. An analyst might seek the causes of poor business unit performance, or map the integration of major new operations software. Generally speaking, business analysis focuses on gathering business requirements and then proposing solutions to meet those requirements.

But what, in general, should you expect from a business analyst whom you hire? You yourself set the overall expectations, of course. You already know the outcomes you desire, even though you may not understand all the implementation details. You might also need an objective validation of your business strategy. Knowing your expectations, the business analyst can then begin activities to meet those expectations. For convenience, these activities are divided into three areas: preparation, process and performance.

Preparation. First, it helps if you are prepared. You already understand the general need or issue that your business must address. Establish your time constraints and budgetary limits; and be ready to discuss those with your business analyst. If you are unsure of the size of the project, commission a smaller feasibility study or situation analysis to examine the general scope and solution parameters. Draw up a contract that defines the work to be delivered, as well as the project parameters and constraints. Also, compose a mutual nondisclosure agreement and sign it with your analyst. Additionally, give your business analyst access to your staff members and their explicit cooperation.

Process. The collection of business requirements is an art unto itself that requires experienced practitioners and facilitators. Your business analyst should have a general familiarity with the problem domain, as well as good interpersonal skills. The analyst should come prepared with a "tool kit" of templates for methodology, process and deliverable work products. The process of eliciting requirements may take the form of written questionnaires, individual interviews, holistic brainstorming seminars, focused workshops or any and all of these techniques. Depending on the scope of work, you may have a single analyst or a whole analyst team sited on your premises. The results of the requirements elicitation process should be documented in work product templates, and classified according to the work methodology.

Performance. Your business analyst concludes the study by setting the stage for performing a business transformation based on requirements gathered. The study results are presented formally, and the reports and supporting work documents are handed over to you. These materials should include, at least, a problem definition document, a description and assessment of the current business state, a description of the desired future state, and a pro forma execution plan allowing you to move from the current to the future state. Additionally, the analysis materials may include a list of alternative solutions, a list of circumstances considered in choosing the recommended solution, a list of risk factors and mitigating actions associated with moving to the future state, and a high level cost estimate for implementing the execution plan.

Business consultants are often accused of being hired to tell you what you just told them. In a certain sense, this is true. A good analyst will learn your business model and come to know it as well as or better than you do. Your aims and priorities will be documented and shared with your whole leadership team, developing a common vision for the future. But more than that, you will be given a plan to make your vision come true. That is what you should expect from your business analyst.