



Business Dimensions Consulting Group Inc.

Bridging the Gap Between Business and IT

What Can You Do As A Leader?

by Alice Bienia

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Accessing and Leveraging Talent

As a CIO, information technology manager, business or service leader, you realize that rapid response, creativity and innovation will be key requirements to addressing the challenges presented by today's business environment. As a leader you have clarity of purpose, a clear value proposition and a driving passion to achieve the agenda you have set for yourself, your team and your organization. The challenges you likely face are three-fold: leading or guiding the strategic direction, responding rapidly to specific business problems or business opportunities that arise along the way and attracting, developing and retaining the talent that will be required to achieve your vision.

Rapid response, creativity and innovation will be key requirements to addressing the challenges presented by today's business environment.

Ideally your team would have all the talent, skills, experiences, capability and time to address the issues at hand and deliver what is required or what was promised. Unfortunately the skills and competencies required to successfully execute your vision are hard to obtain and to retain. This is driven in part by the fact that today's business systems and solutions are increasingly sophisticated, complex and highly technical in composition and secondly because the same skills and competencies you require are in high demand by organizations and industries globally. And yet access to talent is imperative to developing the resiliency and responsiveness required for business growth and well being in the current environment.

We see evidence in the marketplace that leaders who are succeeding are connecting with this talent virtually. The evolution of Linux software is but one such example where individuals and groups leveraged networking technologies to create a loosely formed community guided by their common values and purpose, rather than structured hierarchies and rules. The term 'collective

'action' has emerged to describe the principles behind this phenomenon, and serves to differentiate this advanced level of collaboration from the mental constructs that may already exist around other collaborative terms such as partnering or teamwork. Regardless of what terms are used, the goals sought are higher levels of collaboration than previous attempts to work together achieved, as well as accessing talent wherever it can be found.

Of course, it takes more than new communication technologies to create the desired effect of collective action. The ability to leverage talent by increasing the level of collaboration between internal information technology (IT) service groups and operational or functional groups is lagging and will require diligent support of both parties, if it is to be addressed.

Historically, many CIO's and information technology managers experienced significant project delivery shortfalls that resulted in erosion of customer confidence and trust. Lack of skills, competencies and ability to understand the client's business requirements were often cited as the root cause of these failed projects. To address this situation, many information technology service groups have incorporated a Business Analyst (BA) position into their service stream to provide these competencies.

A fully proficient business analyst understands business systems and what it takes to improve business performance. In order to develop a solution to a particular business problem, the business analyst will need to engage various members within the business operational groups as well as technical architects and other technical service providers in the design, compilation and delivery of the required components of the business solution.

A good business analyst can significantly improve the return on their clients' business system investments and reduce the risk for the CIO and the IT service group of project overruns, limited ROI's, failure to fully meet the business needs and erosion of trust and weakened relationships. In order to do so, the business analyst must address several gaps, the gap in business system performance as well as the gap in effective business and IT service engagement.

Closing the Gap

Needless to say, the fully proficient business analyst will require a wide breadth of skills, knowledge and experience. Competency or proficiency of practice is obviously a key requirement and the basis for trust. There are however, other key factors which will determine the success of the business analyst, other than individual skills and competencies and a high degree of personal commitment.

Putting aside the debate as to whether the business analyst should be part of the client's or part of the service group's organization, the business analyst position requires a high degree of non-authoritarian leadership, regardless of who they report to organizationally. Like other specialist or advisory positions that may exist within the organization, the business analyst typically controls neither the resources of the business operations or information technology service groups. They do not have organizational budgets, nor do they control the subject matter experts, system analysts, vendors, technical architects or change specialists. None of these people report to them.

On the other hand, the fully proficient BA is typically assigned a high or wide degree of accountability. They are expected to create value for their customers. Accountability goals often contain expectations for effective business solutions, changes in operational performance, and customer satisfaction. Those experts who have studied job and organizational design (Designing High Performance Jobs, Robert Simons; Harvard Business Review, July-August 2005) tell us that positions that are designed with narrow control and wide accountability goals will in turn require a wide span of influence and high level of support.

The business analyst will indeed need to rely on their proficiency, reputation, resourcefulness and personal and interpersonal skills to effectively influence business decisions and engage and garnish the support of others over which they execute little or no control. Indeed the BA's authority will come in large part not from the formal job authorities granted but from their competency or proficiency as BA practitioners. For the BA, reputation and trust will be their source of power not control.

Even the most qualified of business analysts can however run into difficulty in organizations where the BA position is given wide accountability but the organizational structure is designed in such a way that the level of support required reflecting this accountability is not aligned with the desired outcome. Working with numerous large and mid size organizations alike, the greatest roadblock to BA effectiveness, other than proficiency of skills, is how tightly the resources of both the IT and operational groups are being controlled.

If we expect the business analyst to indeed provide the client with a solution then we must recognize that they will need the support of others. The fully proficient business analyst is not executing a task level job. Developing solutions, particularly those requiring creativity and innovation will require the support, contribution, and intelligence of those individuals around them. This means the BA needs to move beyond any job tasks associated with their role, and collaborate heavily with others.

The BA needing this wider level of support may start to encounter the rigidity of the organization. Countless cases exist where the operational business manager severely restricts access to subject matter experts, business users or other resources in their control. On the service side the business analyst tries to garner support from technical specialists, system experts, architects and other specialists that may in turn be controlled and measured by formal service level agreements that do not accommodate, recognize or reward the provision of internal support to the BA.

The ability of the BA to get the level of support from others whether that is on the operational or supply side of the equation requires that they appeal to people's sense of shared responsibility. Although the ability to influence largely falls to the BA, business leaders and managers can ease the way by ensuring that the 'white space' on the organizational chart does not become hostile territory for the BA to maneuver through. This must be reflected in the organization's strategy, their values, culture, and organizational structure and design.

In order to deliver effective and innovative business solutions, the business analyst must essentially create a 'network' of people, a virtual team, regardless of their position or place in the organizational structure, albeit temporary. The effort to successfully deliver the solution to the client will likely require undertaking dozens of small collaborations over a relatively short period of time. The desired organizational design allows people to collaborate freely around a result or desired outcome, even though most will also have task level requirements associated with their own individual jobs.

The ability to contribute to collaborative efforts orchestrated by the business analyst is imperative to the BA's success. Collaboration creates density in the 'people network' of an organization, which in turn allows work to proceed rapidly and effectively. Dense networks of people allow required information to be provided to those that need it when it is needed as opposed to the information flow bottlenecks that can typically occur in organizations exhibiting a high degree of hierarchical structure where there is 'sparse' connectivity. This model recognizes that true power resides with those that are a source of information rather than with those that control information. Dense networks of people organized around collective action increases both the pace at which things progress as well as resilience and flexibility.

Although bridging the gap between business operations and IT service groups has largely been seen as an issue for the CIO and IT organizations, the inability

close that gap creates a real business issue. If you as a business or IT manager or leader are still arbitrating conflicts between service and customer groups, the likely root cause is human performance system design failure.

Senior business managers, whether on the operations or service side who want effective business solutions must step outside of their own organizational boundaries and encourage the development of dense people networks by lending their support and influence to garner cooperation from and to other areas or domains.

Rather than wrestling for control over these scarce resources, the real opportunity resides in getting on the same page with respect to the purpose of the business analyst role, assigning clear accountability for the solution, developing clarity around the expectations, and then working together to design densely networked business environments that allow for successful execution of the role.

Success will be determined in large part to how well the business analyst position is defined and designed, how the role is structured and positioned with the overall structure and design of the surrounding organization and the alignment of that position with the goals and objectives of both the operational and service components of the organization.