

The business analyst in an Agile world

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Despite popular belief, I don't necessarily agree that Agile has killed the business analyst (BA), but it doesn't mean that something can't be learned from this growing belief.



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It is always an interesting moment when any business position becomes threatened, by changing business environments or even outdated methodologies. With the rise of Agile software development, the role of the traditional BA has come under threat. Their role is shifting and the question isn't whether BAs are still necessary, but what a business analyst would look like in an Agile world.

The traditional business analyst

To understand whether an agile BA could exist and what that would look like, we first have to look at what a traditional business analyst is and how they function.

According to the International Institute of Business Analysis, business analysis serves to maximise the value delivered by an organisation to its stakeholders. The traditional role of a business analyst is to record the needs and wants of the stakeholders and then relay those requirements to the development team.

The BA's role is important as they form the bridge between the organisation delivering the product and the stakeholders.

“ The focus is not on software, but rather on providing solutions to business problems and to facilitate the development process. ”

But in an Agile world, the traditional BA can seem to be redundant. Agile tries to bridge the gap between the development team and the stakeholder through the collaborative effort of the team, so it may seem like a business analyst may not be necessary. We then have to ask ourselves whether the emergence of Agile has killed the traditional business analyst. The simple answer is no, but to better understand why, we have to understand the principles of Agile software development.

What is Agile?

Agile is largely a response to old and outdated software development methods which could not cope in an ever changing business environment.

Broadly speaking, it seeks to uncover better ways of developing software with a focus on being able to adapt in an unstable business environment.



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Traditional software development attempts to finish the project all in one go and predict any potential changes or issues at the start of the project. Agile software development, however, builds software incrementally, through a collaborative team effort. The focus is on adaptability as work is broken down into small sprints and work is reviewed and changed at the end of each sprint. Agile is essentially a collaborative team effort; it uses the combined skills of a diverse group of people, rather than just the skills of developers.

With this focus on a collaborative effort, the Agile manifesto outlines four core principles:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- Working software over comprehensive documentation
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- Responding to change over following a plan

There is a clear focus on adaptability and a strong relationship between the team and the stakeholders. This is effectively the role of the traditional business analyst.

Agile software development focuses on the principles of collaboration and open communication rather than on completing

the project all in one go. If the principles are the core of Agile, then any environment or person who adopts these principles becomes 'Agile'.

So what does this mean for the traditional business analyst?

Business analysis: from traditional to agile

The business analyst isn't dead; they have simply become an Agile business analyst. Agile business analysts aren't Agile because they work in an Agile software development team but because they hold the Agile principles. Then how do we define an Agile business analyst?

An Agile business analyst is defined by the following characteristics:

Adaptable: Agile requires you be adaptable and constantly open to change. This has been a key definer of the traditional BA as they have always needed to adapt to the business process.

Goal oriented: The goal of the Agile BA is to bring value to an organisation by solving business problems. The Agile BA must always be able to see the bigger picture and how that fits in with the development process.

Innovation: As with everything the Agile BA does, business problem solving is at the heart of it. The Agile BA must constantly look for new approaches to solving a problem; you must constantly innovate.

Leadership: Because of collaboration and communication are at the heart of an Agile environment, the Agile BA must foster these principles and facilitate communication between the team and the stakeholders.

Empathy: The Agile BA deals with the business sponsor, customers, users, solution team, technical personnel and management. They are the mediator and therefore large amount of empathy is needed to be the link between all the boundaries.

Business oriented: While the Agile software development team is focused on the technological issues the Agile BA is focussed on the needs of the business and the project.

Anticipation: The Agile BA must constantly anticipate a problem and the impact of that problem not only on a specific business area, but on the whole organisation.

Agile is a way of working.

“ The traditional business analyst is not dying, but changing, constantly adapting in a changing business environment – it is becoming Agile. ”

So fear not if you are a business analyst, as through the Agile principles you have an important role to play in an Agile world.

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