ALM Trends: Requirements and the role of business analysts

Agile organizations look for ways to overcome obstacles associated with requirements management. These two tips look at trends in requirements management tools and the changing role of the business analyst.

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Trends in ALM: Requirements management tools

By Yvette Francino

A strong application starts with gathering solid requirements, yet over and over again, industry surveys are showing that requirements management is one of the biggest challenges that organizations face.

Colleen Frye reports in Agile, virtualization help with long-standing challenges:

Requirements, no matter the methodology, continues to be a persistent problem for organizations, as does process improvement and testing. When asked which part of the application lifecycle their organizations have the most difficulty with, requirements gathering, followed by process improvement and software testing/QA, topped the list for the past two years.

What are vendors doing about it? In this interview we talk to Forrester analyst Mary Gerush, author of the report, Right Tools. Write Requirements. Right On!

SSQ: What top trends have you been seeing in requirements management tools, and why are these important?

Mary Gerush: You mention RM tools, so I'm not sure if you are including requirements definition tools in that bucket, but I'll assume that you are. The market is segmented based on my research, although the market is evolving very dynamically due to the increased recognition of the cost of poor requirements and a heightened focus on the business analyst (BA) role. Having said that, here are some trends I’m seeing:

Improved usability

Historically, requirements management tools have been heavy-weight and required significant ramp-up time, so when I've talked to clients who have invested in some of the heavy-weight tools, in many cases, those tools have become shelfware due to usability issues (and also commonly lack of BA skills and processes). Over the last one to two years,
however, vendors have invested in improving usability, making the tools easier to learn and use. Requirements definition tool vendors are also emphasizing ease of use.

**Collaboration**

Because today's teams are distributed (even if on two floors in the same building), tool vendors are focused on providing collaboration capabilities, such as Wikis, commenting, and discussions, to help teams stay in sync.

**On-demand models**

The market leaders are adding SaaS models to their offerings, and there are a number of newer vendors offering requirements definition and management tools either solely on-demand (with pretty attractive pricing models) or both on-demand and on premise. I'm still seeing most of my clients choosing on-premise models, but I expect the use of SaaS in this area to increase.

**Process agnostic**

Most organizations don't use just one methodology; they may use a combination of waterfall, Agile, and RUP, or a hybrid version (so not "pure" waterfall or "pure" Agile), so while there are tools purpose-built for Agile methods, other vendors are crafting their products to be customizable for the customer's processes.

**Support for modeling, prototyping, simulations**

This trend affects the requirements definition tool arena primarily. Requirements management tools have been around for awhile, so their functionality is fairly well-defined. The requirements definition market, however, is relatively new, and it's growing as organizations recognize that they need to get requirements right and that requirements definition is a creative process, requiring that BAs elicit, analyze, document, and validate requirements in a more iterative way and with more pictorial artifacts - not just text-heavy business requirements documents. Some of these tools are really cool (and make me want
to be a BA again!

**SSQ: How is collaboration being used in requirements management tools and why is it important?**

Gerush: Today's teams are different from those of the past. They are diverse, distributed, and work for different companies (often with competing priorities). As I mentioned above, requirements vendors are emphasizing collaborative tools, such as Wikis, discussions, commenting, annotating, and viewing via lightweight readers to keep teams in sync.

**SSQ: Some requirements management tools have a lot of bells and whistles, configurability, and flexibility. However, then a lot of work must be done to configure or customize your tools to match your processes. How do customers feel about this?**

Gerush: That's a great question. I talk to so many clients that are just getting the BA shops in order, so tools other than Microsoft are a far-off dream. But clients definitely need usable products with short ramp-up and small learning curves; otherwise, the tools become shelfware. I do see tool vendors recognizing this and working to improve usability as I mentioned above.

**SSQ: If an organization is a smaller shop that is only one methodology (for example, Scrum) would it be better to shop for a tool that is Scrum specific or to get a tool that is more configurable?**

Gerush: The answer to this question (of course) is: "It depends." It depends on what problem they need to solve and their preferred practices. The market overview documents some of the variables shops should evaluate before investing. For example, if they know they will *never* use another methodology, it might be wise to invest in one of the purpose-built Agile tools, but if that's not a certainty, I would look for a solution that is process agnostic. I do believe though that the Agile tool vendors are looking for ways to evolve their products to fit other scenarios, but I haven't done a lot of research in that area.
Get to know your business analysts

By Melanie Webb

Are you curious about the role of business analysts in your organization? The demand for business analysts has risen in the past year, and Forrester’s recent survey shows that these professionals handle a wide variety of responsibilities and bring very important skills to the project teams they work on.

Where do business analysts work and who are they?

According to this 2010 Q3 survey of 1,461 respondents conducted by Forrester and the International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA), business analysts work in organizations ranging in size from under 100 to over 20,000 employees. The majority of respondents were from organizations with 1,000 or more employees, with 25% working in companies with more than 20,000 employees. Business analysts, or BAs, as they are often referred to in the survey report, represent a wide scope of industries as well, from media and entertainment to the public sector. Totaling 58%, most respondents work in finance, insurance, business and IT service industries. Seventy percent of respondents are employed at North American companies.

The title “business analyst” is used in this report to represent several different roles, from business architect to business systems analyst. The highest number of respondents categorized themselves as either senior business analysts (30%) or business analysts (26%). BAs also assume responsibilities as product managers, requirements engineers and, oftentimes, as consultants. Nearly half of those surveyed responded “yes” to the question “Are there more individuals at your company who play a role similar to yours today than there were a year ago?” Interestingly, 46% of respondents also said “yes” to this question in the 2009 survey, reflecting ongoing demand for BAs over the past couple of years.

What credentials do business analysts have, and what is next for them?

Survey respondents have varied educational backgrounds; it seems several paths can lead to this dynamic career choice. Most BAs have either a bachelor’s degree or a master’s or
MBA, with business or computer sciences being the most common areas of study; however, 10% of respondents identified their degrees as falling within the liberal arts category, and nearly 20% of respondents’ highest education attained is a high school diploma, some college or an associate’s degree.

Despite the fact that more than half of respondents lack any formal certification in business analysis, the vast majority (75%) have worked in the field for more than five years, with a full 19% citing more than 15 years experience in business analysts roles. Many BAs have previous experience as developers, quality assurance professionals, technical writers, consultants and IT directors. Mobility is common, and most BAs aspire to a management role, with a title such as senior business analyst or director of systems analysts.

According to the survey report, “Interestingly, 16% want to move into a business architect position, a relatively new role that is evolving as business-centric approaches to technology become more common. To gain an understanding of the business architect role, see the October 24, 2008, “The Up-And-Coming Business Architect” report and the September 27, 2010, “Business Architects — The Strategy Job Is Open” report.

**What is a typical week like for a business analyst?**

Most BAs identified themselves as generalists responsible for varying tasks and engaged in projects from software development to process improvement. Many in this profession are responsible for enterprise application implementation, migration or upgrade, or for business process management. They are also involved in a wide range of activities in any given week. The results in the survey report highlight that “Requirements definition (elicitation, analysis, documentation, and validation) makes up about a third of a BA’s normal work week. This aligns with research that indicates getting requirements right early leads to higher project success and saves organizations time and money spent on rework.”

Nearly half of respondents describe their organizations’ software development lifecycle as utilizing a mix of iterative, Agile and waterfall development methodologies, while 34% identify as predominantly waterfall, and just 9% identify as predominantly Agile.
What skills and knowledge are most important for BAs?

Business analysts themselves may be best qualified to identify the skills needed to perform their job functions. This survey found that as in the 2009 survey, BAs value certain soft skills as critical or very important.

Top five soft skills for BAs:
1. Communication (written and oral)
2. Analysis and critical thinking
3. Collaboration
4. Customer and results orientation
5. Planning, organization

Similarly, BAs named the most valuable techniques they need to be able to perform their roles.

Top five techniques BAs need to know:
1. Interviewing
2. Facilitation
3. Modeling
4. Negotiation
5. Business rules design

Generally speaking, business analysis professionals most often leverage the IIBA Business Analysis Body of Knowledge (BABOK) or Strengths Opportunities Weaknesses Threats (SOWT) analytical frameworks to support analysis, and they value business domain knowledge and organizational strategy over technology knowledge.
Conclusion

Business analysis professionals represent a growing, dynamic field and require a diverse skill set to perform the wide-ranging tasks required of them. They fulfill several important functions in both small and large organizations and continue to be in demand.
Resources from IBM

Collaborative Design Management Powered by Jazz

Streamlined Build and Deployments Powered by Jazz

Five Application Lifecycle Management Imperatives for Successful Global Software Development

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