

# 20 Lessons Learnt Over 20 Years Of Doing Business Analysis

Written by [Danie van den Berg, CBAP](#)



## “Time has a wonderful way to show us what really matters.” – Margaret Peters

It is quite hard for me to realise (and quite frankly a little unsettling) that I've been working in the Business Analysis world for twenty years now. On the one hand, I'm starting to feel old (although, apparently, life begins at forty), on the other hand there is great solace in having the benefit of having a big enough chunk of experience behind you to raise the confidence levels in most any situations that you are inevitably confronted with.

Since I like to occasionally take a moment to reflect on happenings in my life and work, I've decided to pen down the key lessons that I can think of that I've been privileged enough to learn over the past two decades.

**Disclaimer:** These lessons are by no means whatsoever the 'golden template', 'silver bullet' or ultimate 'quick-fix' list of things to guarantee a bump-free ride as a Business Analyst. They are simply my own personal, humble observations and learnings and hopefully they can add value or help someone out there... and of course, I am still learning every, single day...

What would be exceptionally great, is if some of you would respond at the end of this post and add some of your own, most valuable lessons learnt. Would simply love to hear yours! So, in no particular order, here goes...

## 1- Listen

Many moons ago, my grade 3 teacher, Mrs Momberg, taught our class the following poem (attributed to Edward Hersey Richards):

“A wise old owl once lived in an oak. The more he saw, the less he spoke. The less he spoke, the more he heard. Why can't we all be like that wise old bird?”

My thanks go out to Mrs Momberg, for in sharing with us that little poem, I've learnt how powerful it can be to take serious notice of the one-to-two ratio relationship of mouth-to-ears.

Listening, truly listening, makes all the difference to correctly identifying, accurately understanding and adequately addressing the needs of customers, stakeholders, team members or anyone else for that matter whom we engage with as part of our work.

Often, I still have to prevent myself from interrupting speakers and I try to listen for understanding and to not constantly generate responses while the speaker is talking. It has been said that the highest form of respect is to listen, so I try to remind myself that by listening, I also show respect.

## 2- Relationships Are Key

Life is about relationships, isn't it? Also, when it comes to our work. A big component of good, solid relationships revolves around trust. Building trust needs to be a focus and this usually takes time. Steven Covey famously said that "when it comes to people, slow is fast and fast is slow". But it certainly is worth the investment of time and effort.

A few key relationship focus points for me are:

**Keeping promises.** We also need to always strive to deliver on what we commit to do, since this builds trust and integrity.

**Managing expectations.** This extends from the base of trust that we establish. This is truly hard and certainly requires constant, daily, diligent work. But if you place yourself in the shoes of those that you seek to serve, wouldn't you like to have a heads-up, an early warning, a convenient status update?

**Be a mensch.** Be a human being who is able to relate and truly see the people around you. Try to connect with those around you in a way that is not merely transactional, but even transformational. Time does of course not always allow for this, but if you work with people over an extended period, try to not always be about JUST the deliverables.

It is truly hard to properly quantify the immense value of good, trusted relationships within an organisation. The time it saves in effective communication and quick decision making not to mention not having to navigate through all the politics of who's aligned with (or against) who, is incalculable. Solid, professional, trusted relationships just make life so much simpler to get things done quickly and efficiently.

## 3- Start With WHY – Build The Right Thing

In his book, "Start with Why", Simon Sinek speaks about the golden circle of always starting with why. He emphasises the importance of clearly identifying the reason for doing things, for building or improving what you are doing. At the core of the concentric circles, is the question of why?

Why are we doing this in this way? Why does it need to change? Why are we not changing it?

By asking Why, it forces the discussion around purpose and strategy, which is probably the best place to start. Root cause analysis supports this notion by Simon, by asking "why?" a number of times until you truly understand the root cause of a problem.

"Why" speaks to purpose, strategy and direction.

Strategy should precede structure.

The compass before the clock.

Effectiveness before efficiency.

By asking why, we attempt to ensure that we are building the right thing, BEFORE we even start to build the thing right.

Furthermore, asking “why?”, is also supported in the prevalence of the “Outside-in” customer-driven design movement. Why would customers take money out of their wallets to buy your product or service? Although there appears to be a recent awakening to the customer experience driven design, truly successful companies have inherently always paid very close attention to what their customers ask for.

As Business Analysts, we need to constantly challenge the businesses we operate in, to ask what the true, real, underlying customer need is. Often business stakeholders assume that they know exactly what the customer needs are, but this might be tainted by their own subjective lenses through which they struggle to operationally fight the fires that rage due to their current system, process, technological or organisational culture constraints. This is where we need to step in and try to bring an unbiased perspective, possibly with the help of some customer-driven data or research to support a different point of view.

## 4- Ask Better Questions

When we ask better questions, we usually get better answers. Similarly asking the wrong questions, could lead to getting wrong answers. My learning has been to commit to spending time prior to every interaction, meeting, workshop in preparing questions that are intentional, purpose-filled and that truly get to the essence of what I am trying to achieve.

Sometimes I also consider asking a second question, upon receiving an initial response. This sometimes prompts the responder to qualify or go deeper in terms of their initial answer.

Rephrasing what I hear as responses to my questions, has helped me to make sure that I properly understand what the responder meant. If not, they have the opportunity to correct my misinterpretation and it also shows them that I care about understanding them correctly.

To be truly impartial, especially when eliciting requirements, another key question-related learning, has been to not ask leading questions. If I do this, I plant seeds into the mind of the listener. The responses are then tainted or influenced by what I mentioned in my leading question and this is therefore not a truly, unbiased response.

## 5- Accept That You Don't Need To Have All The Answers

For some strange reason, business analysts often feel as if they need to know everything. This places them under pressure, especially since

- a. they don't,
- b. most often they are in the midst of still uncovering the actual state of play and
- c. even if they did know more than the stakeholders they engage with, this does not mean that have the answers.

The fact is as a Business Analyst, you don't know everything. And this is okay. In fact, it is wonderful. It provides you with the unique, unbiased opportunity and perspective to see problems with fresh eyes. It gives you license to ask ‘seemingly stupid’ questions that most people are too scared to ask for fear of appearing ignorant or uninformed. Quite often these types of questions open up amazing problem-solving conversations that would have otherwise remained dormant.

Once I realised that the true value I can add is that of simplifying, synthesising and reducing complicated sets of problems, processes, information sets, etc. into structured, easy-to understand, consumable artefacts, models and documents, it was truly liberating.

As a BA, you are expertly guiding the subject matter experts and domain specialists in a way where they volunteer information that inevitable bridges the gap between problems and solutions to those problems. This in itself, is more of an art than a science.

## 6- Talk To Your Customers

It is so very, very tempting to get so excited by and wrapped up in our own views of the problems and solutions at hand, that we can very easily completely forget about our true boss, the customer.

Why not rather start with the customer?

Before we embark.

During the process.

Often.

During testing.

After implementation.

Continuously.

The moment we get disengaged from the source of the actual consumer of what we produce, we are entering a very slippery slope. Putting myself in the proverbial 'shoes' of the customer, has often led to me rethinking my original ideas and approaches.

## 7- No Man (Or Woman, Or BA...) Is An Island

Although BA's, especially consulting BA's are sometimes 'parachuted' into client sites, it is very easy to feel quite isolated and to then wrongfully assume that we have to be one-man/woman armies. This is of course not sustainable (or wise) and I've learnt that it is imperative to build a support structure around you to be successful and effective.

Think of identifying and cultivating relationships with key mentors, industry- and domain specialists and more experienced BA's from whom you can learn and with whom you can consult regarding your current challenges. Sometimes just running an approach by a trusted friend, will yield some great ideas and perspectives that you cannot see from your 'in-the-woods' perspective.

Looking back over my career thus far, I can only truly count my numerous blessings and thank those people who gave me an opportunity, a position, a job, advice, support, or a word of encouragement along my journey. I really appreciate it and I still do!

## 8- Join The IIBA

If you are somebody that takes the role of a Business Analyst seriously and you regard it as a profession (and not just a job), you should truly invest in yourself to become the best BA that you can be. This means getting involved (i.e. joining) the best possible professional body in the field of your profession - in this instance (for Business Analysis), in my humble opinion, it is the International Institute of Business Analysis (IIBA).

Since being founded in 2003, they have been widely regarded as the pre-eminent body for the professionalisation for the Business Analysis profession. As at 2014, they've had more than 27000 members across 6 of the 7 continents. They provide the opportunity to collaborate, network, and grow with other BA professionals locally and globally. Go join them today!

## 9- Get Certified

Doctors, Engineers, Chartered Accountants, Actuarial scientists, etc. all belong to professional bodies and they typically all must get certified before they are allowed to claim their respective, coveted certification statuses. Most of these certifications also require a number of Professional Development Units (PDU's) per cycle, which are essentially designed to keep certified members learning, growing and contributing to their professions.

I think this is a very good thing. It creates an environment where certain minimum standards are created. It ensures a level of confidence for the consumers of their services, that they are getting experienced, qualified and knowledgeable BA's in their respective domain areas. From a career growth perspective, it also serves as a decent framework of objectives against which a professional can measure themselves.

The IIBA have created a number of certifications, which assist professional Business Analysts to build their knowledge, as they gain more experience. These include ECBA, CCBA, CBAP, CBDA and AAC. For more on these, go to <https://www.iiba.org/certification/iiba-certifications/>

By way of an example, the premier BA certification currently offered by the IIBA, the Certified Business Analyst Professional (CBAP), includes as minimum eligibility criteria the following:

the completion of a minimum of 7500 hours of Business Analysis Work experience in the last 10 years, within this experience, a minimum of 900 hours completed in 4 of the 6 BABOK® Guide Knowledge Areas, for a total of at least 3600 of the required 7500 total.

- completing a minimum of 35 hours of Professional Development in the last 4 years.
- providing two references,
- agreeing to the Code of Conduct,
- agreeing to the Terms and Conditions,
- passing the exam.

There are currently more than 8000 CBAPs in the world.

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## 10- Apply Techniques

In the late eighties, my favourite tv programme was without a doubt, MacGyver. I loved seeing the ingenious ways that he was able to come-up with solutions to get out of the trickiest situations and all of that with just a utility knife and some duct tape! Just imagine what he would have been able to do if he had more tools at his disposal...

Let us not limit ourselves in terms of our thinking when it comes to using Business Analysis techniques. Abraham Maslow famously said that "If you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail". Often that limited philosophy is followed in our work places and often this leads to less than optimal results.

In the Guide to the Business Analysis Body of Knowledge® (BABOK® Guide) Version 3, there is a list of 50 different techniques at your disposal. Yes FIFTY!!!

There are very few (if any) Business Analysis related problems that you will not be able to solve using these techniques. Be sure to familiarise yourself with these techniques, how they work, when to use them and how to adapt them to your unique circumstances.

## 11- Use Modelling Languages

I've been very privileged as a greenie Business Analyst to be taught early-on how to do modelling. I was introduced to a specific modelling language, called the Unified Modelling Language (UML). As the years progressed I have found the ability to create models, with different perspectives and levels of abstraction

to be invaluable in my ability to understand, elicit, document and explain problems and solutions to my stakeholders in a way that is comprehensive and that covers all possible angles.

Personally, I believe that Business Analysts who only use spreadsheets or word processors, are missing a trick, especially since there is no way that they can accurately document or pick-up all the possible traceability relationships that one notices if you are using a good modelling language, together with a proper modelling tool.

There are very few things that irks me more than people who calls themselves professional Business Analysts, who walk out of an elicitation session with a bullet-point list and then call that a specification. Understanding proper perspectives when modelling, ensures that the BA answers all the various Zachman dimensions, like who, what, why, where, when, how.

Modelling languages provide tried and tested diagram types that can assist the BA in defining scope, identifying system integration information, depict process flows, identify state transitions, document relationships between sets of information, identify rules, constraints, requirements and even who all the various role players are and what processes they are involved in. Following proper approaches (metamodels) when modelling, helps you identify what you otherwise might have missed completely, had you just focused on one element like process...

I've previously written more on this topic in the following BA Times article.

## 12- Be The Glue

It could be argued that the best friend of the Project Manager is the Business Analyst. The PM's role is to keep the ship headed in the right direction, delivery that project in time, on budget. But typically, they do not really have the luxury of getting involved in the details. This is where a good BA can add immense value to the Project Manager. Since we live in the details, The BA needs to constantly ensure alignment of understanding, expectations and communication between the various stakeholders. If anything tends to go even slightly off track, we are typically the first to sense it.

Having this ground-level barometer could serve a Project Manager very well indeed. They could make quick course corrections or implement risk mitigations that could end up saving the project lots of time & money.

Since BA's move vertically and horizontally across the entire organisation, we are in a unique position to have our 'ears to the ground' of everything that relates to a specific project. Our role therefore, is to be the glue. To constantly facilitate a coherent and aligned understanding. Facilitation is the name of the game.

This facilitation should always be aimed at getting people to collaborate better. Constantly linking people and getting them to engage on issues of mutual interest, is key. "...people tend to support what they help create" - I read this somewhere years ago and can't quite find who first coined this, but it really struck me, and I've personally found this to be true.

Although this is much more difficult (and often slower) than not including numerous people into a session, this is the only true way to get broader buy-in and true collaboration when trying to introduce change. Like the old African saying goes: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

So, remember to see yourself as the glue on a project, this has helped me on numerous occasions.

## 13- Be Comfortable With Uncertainty

Most Business Analysis is done in the context of something that needs to change. Sometimes what is currently there, needs to be improved or replaced or it simply is no longer fit for the future state of the organisation and needs to be transformed into something entirely different.

Whenever we walk through the doors on a new project, change is sure to follow, and this makes most people very uncomfortable indeed. Let's face it, very few people like change. It creates uncertainty and uncertainty often generates a huge amount of fear. Will potential changes threaten people's way of doing things, change their comfortable processes, possibly even affect their job security?

Developing soft skills, EQ and an understanding of how to work with people in a way that does not put additional stress on changing situations is critical. But the mindset you need to have as a person when it comes to your everyday headspace, is also important.

Besides handling changing organisational situations with the utmost sensitivity, we should also become comfortable with the fact that every day and every situation will probably differ from the previous. You might constantly find yourself out of your comfort zone, challenged with different new, unique sets of problems that you've never faced before. Such is the life of the BA. If this is not for you, where you'd prefer the predictability of every day being pretty much like the one before, then maybe you need to pursue a different career path.

Business Analysis is to constantly feel out of your comfort zone, but then again, outside your comfort zone, is the only place where one can truly grow, isn't it?

## 14- Become A Lifelong Student

As I get older and especially in this information-bombardment-age that we live in, I constantly agree with the sentiment of the following quote (widely attributed by Albert Einstein): "The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don't know."

The simple truth is that none of us know it all and none of us can stay on top of everything that gets produced on a daily basis. Whether it is new research, inventions and discoveries, better methodologies or techniques, or even just new technologies or business models that severely disrupt the industries that we work in. But we have to do our best to try to keep up.

We have to commit to becoming lifelong students. We need to become ferocious readers. We need to accept the fact that having to learn new things every day, for the rest of your life, is now no longer an optional luxury, but rather a necessity, especially in the field of business analysis.

In doing this, we should not just focus on acquiring knowledge – this appears to have a rather limited shelf life and can become quickly outdated. Instead we must focus on acquiring true value-adding skills in the midst of ever-changing landscapes.

## 15- Measure Impact & Value

On numerous previous projects, I have found that whenever goals, successful outcomes, key performance indicators or metrics are not very clear, well-defined and written down, those objectives are very seldom achieved.

Clarifying metrics and success criteria, is some of the best questions a Business Analyst can ask at the onset of a project, in order to clarify what the required value add for a project will be. It creates clarity around the expectation and guides the team members towards what they need to work toward and clarity, creates purpose.

After doing this, it does of course help to create a baseline set of metrics, against which you can later measure any progress added as a direct result of the change initiative.

"To measure is to know. If you can not measure it, you cannot improve it" – Lord Kelvin

## 16- Iterate

Although the term 'Agile' has been overused, misquoted and sometimes even abused as a type of buzzword over the last decade, no-one disputes the need for progress to happen faster, for business to be more adaptable and responsive to customer needs and for IT and product development teams to innovate as quickly and effectively as possible.

I've personally learnt a lot about the freedom to "not have to have it perfect from the onset". The gradual move away from factory-line 'Big Design Up Front (BDUF)' philosophies towards more emergent design strategies, makes a lot of sense, provided it is done properly.

Obviously, this does not mean that one:

- a. stops doing proper, professional analysis,
- b. lose track of the bigger picture,
- c. become a cowboy and reduce complex scenarios to a mere, oversimplified list of post-it notes

Instead it means that we adopt a different psychological mindset where we:

- Accept that we don't have all the answers up-front,
- Make room for trial & error, failure (blasphemy!) and the ability to gradually improve our ideas,
- Split complicated and gigantic pieces of work into bite-size chunks,
- Have opportunities to change our minds,
- Constantly engage with customers and stakeholder WHILE we create their world, so that by the product keeps on evolving while the world is changing,
- We constantly 'ship' and deliver increments of value that is preferably sellable or useable whenever possible.

As a rather pragmatic person, being more agile has even helped me in my personal life to take more risks, become more creative and allow myself to make more mistakes.

## 17- Remember You've Got One Of The Best Jobs In The World!

The idea that as a Business Analyst, I have one of the best jobs in the world, has been a revelation that I only gradually realised. And since that realisation, I've looked very differently at my job.

Think about it...

Every single time you are confronted with long queues, inefficient systems, forms with redundant information, unnecessary procedures, frustrating IVR systems, poorly designed websites or phone apps, illogical (dumb?!) customer survey questionnaire, etc. this is as a direct result of poor business analysis.

As a Business Analyst, YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD – hopefully for the better!

The role of a Business Analyst allows you to:

- Create new products, processes, systems, businesses
- Change whatever is not working
- Improve existing environments  Shape the world around you
- Make things better
- Truly add value

Since Business Analysis practices is not restricted to any specific industry or sphere in society, you can literally apply your skills wherever there are problems. And problems are everywhere...So, go-on, count yourself lucky to be a BA and go and make a real difference!

## 18- Details Are Key



The difference between a decent homemade Sunday afternoon dessert and an excellent homemade Sunday afternoon dessert, is often in the details of how it was made. The same is true for most things, also with respect to business and solution analysis.

I've learnt that I need to get comfortable with the fact that an excellent Business Analyst, needs to familiarise themselves extremely well with the details of what they are working on (perhaps even more so than any other project resource on a typical project team). This does mean lots and lots of reading, constant research, frequent and various meetings & workshops and daily documentation and/or modelling.

But as Business Analyst, even though I might not be the Subject Matter Expert on every aspect of a project, I need to keep very close tabs on how everything fits together (Traceability), how requirements change over time (Requirements management) and how decisions and risks affect all the requirements and rules in the project (Impact management).

You want to become the go-to person, who has both a wide and a deep view of all aspects on a project. The difference is in the details.

## 19- Take Action!

Ofentimes when we don't know where to start, we get into a state of semi-paralysis and we don't start. The longer we procrastinate, the more we seem to be unable to start. What I've learnt, is to JUST START.

Ofentimes, by just beginning, it somehow 'loosens' up new thoughts and ideas that then tend to lead you to the next step and then the next.

Action begets action. Motion precedes emotion.

Take it from the inventor of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, who said: "The only difference between success and failure is the ability to take action."

## 20- Be Yourself

Besides all the wonderful best practices, methodologies, techniques, etc. that exist today, the fact is that no-one else on earth can bring exactly what YOU can bring...YOU.

Your own unique ideas, perspectives and value. So, do NOT keep it to yourself!

You have been hired (and are being paid) to bring your uniqueness (who you are as well as your experiences) to your workplace and if you do not do this, it is not fair to those employing to do so.

You are unique and what you bring to the party is special – never forget this!

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He enjoys mentoring BA professionals, teaching business analysis topics and prepping BAs for CBAP exams. Danie is passionate about the role a Business Analyst plays within organisations and believes it is central to changing and improving the world we work and live in.