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Successful Business Analysis Interviews Hinge on Prep Work

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Perry McLeod, CBAP, PMP, PMI-PBA, SMC

A structured business analysis interview is not a spontaneous ad-hoc means to gather requirements. Formal interviews require meaning, a well-understood objective, knowledge about the interviewee, and careful research, planning, execution, and follow-up. In ordinary usage, the word "meaning" implies intention, intention implies design, and design implies a designer. The design is the interview and the designer is the business analyst. The intent is to design the interview rather than just plan it. Business analysts depend on interviews as a technique for conducting research and acquiring requirements. Too often, however, a formal interview focuses directly on the requirements rather than the information or raw data needed to build the requirements during Requirement Analysis and Design Definition. In extreme cases, the business analyst may only rely on interviews. Because of misuse, poor preparation, and execution, interviews are one of the least successful ways to build requirements. In the pages that follow, we will examine some design practices that will elevate the common business analysis interview into a well-designed, carefully constructed, and seamlessly executed event.

To Interview or Not to Interview

Ask not what the requirement is; ask what we need to meet expectations and fulfill the stakeholders' needs. In *A Guide to the Business Analysis Body of Knowledge® (BABOK® Guide)*, the International Institute of Business Analysis™ suggests the intended use of an interview is to "elicit business analysis information from a person or group of people. The interview can also be used for establishing relationships and building trust between business analysts and stakeholders" (2015, 290). A business analysis interview falls under two basic types:

Structured Interview

- The interviewer has a pre-defined set of questions; the interview, which is sensible, planned, and intended to provide the analyst with specific answers, is often a means to gather information not suited for other business analysis techniques.

Unstructured Interview

- An interview lacks any pre-defined questions; the interviewer and the interviewee discuss topics of interest in an open-ended way. This technique is best suited for building a social connection to the stakeholder.

When considering a structured business analysis interview as the means to gather the raw data needed to build requirements, follow the *BABOK® Guide* (2015, 293):

- Elicit information [raw data]
- Establish rapport, expand relationships, build trust,
- Increase stakeholder involvement
- Observe nonverbal responses
- Seek support
- Require full discussions with stakeholders
- Explore topics in detail, and
- Allow for privacy

The IIBA also suggests limitations or drawbacks to the interview process such as the time required of all parties concerned, unintentionally leading the interviewee to a biased conclusion, and the amount of training needed to conduct effective interviews.

The Planning

The Goal

Why must this interview take place? What must and should be accomplished? How will the interview be designed? A structured business analysis interview is more than a conversation; it is a social event requiring careful planning. According to the *BABOK® Guide* (2015, 291), successful interview depends on factors such as:

- A level of understanding of the domain by the interviewer
- Experience of the interviewer in conducting interviews
- Skill of the interviewer in documenting discussions
- Readiness of the interviewee to provide the relevant information
- The ability of interviewer to conduct the interview
- Degree of clarity in the interviewer's mind about the goal of the interview and
- Rapport between the interviewer(s) and the interviewee

The Objectives

We have already explored some reasons for conducting a structured business analysis interview; however, we have not discussed the intent of any particular interview. Stating the specific goal of the interview is challenging—the goal must be S.M.A.R.T (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, and Time Bound). It is helpful to frame a goal with this simple syntax. For this interview to be successful, I must have:

- A short declarative statement describing why time has been taken from the interviewee
- A fit criterion or simple test to verify that the goal has been reached
- A set of items to follow up on
- A sense that the information obtained will be useful and
- A timeline for each question including how much time is allotted for follow-up

A successful, structured business analysis interview depends on many factors. Oftentimes, the business analyst does not have the required experience or has developed poor habits. Avoiding common mistakes while understanding the difference between your wants and needs as well as those of the stakeholders is the first step to creating an acceptable goal agreeable to both the interviewer and interviewee.

Common Mistakes

- Not following a key thread from a given answer
- Not exploring why some answers are given
- Not understanding interview notes after the interview
- Poor active listening
- Making assumptions about what was said
- Asking too many closed questions
- Allowing for monosyllabic answers
- Moreover, not drawing the interviewee out enough

The Structure

Planned, well-executed business analysis interviews tend to be the best technique to elicit important information from managers and executives. Their time is precious, their perspective tends to be unique, and they often have a very clear message they want to convey. Regardless of with whom we are meeting, we must take the time to design an interview yielding the most value for both the stakeholder and the business analyst. The structure of the interview will depend on many aspects, such as the overall goal, the location, the parties involved, the business analyst's experience, time, the questions themselves, various personalities, and the organizational culture. We will explore these topics in more depth in a later section. A paradigm approach to the initial structure of the interview known as a Situation, Target, and Proposal (STP) can be a fast way to begin the planning process. Table 1 provides an example of how an STP is used.

1. Situation: What issue or issues will the business analyst discuss?
2. Target: For each topic of discussion or for each line of questioning, what is the desired outcome?
3. Proposal: An idea, which could resolve the issue or, in this case, a line of questioning.

Table 1. Example Situation Target Proposal

Situation	Target	Proposal
Example: Poor sponsor support. When a problem arises, the sponsor may not have the authority, or perspective, to support the project adequately.	Obtain a greater understanding of the sponsor's level of interest and authority over the project.	Begin with a rapport building exercise. Casually address issues of authority and interest. Slowly begin to increase the importance of the questions.

Research the Stakeholder

Understanding your stakeholder will help lay the foundation for trust and credibility while easing the difficulty with delayed reciprocity. As business analysts, we expect a lot from our stakeholders. What we promise them, if not seen for months or even years, could greatly affect the trust and credibility we have worked so hard to achieve. Unlike a direct barter system, our half of the exchange—common where information or specific actions are required—may take weeks or months to reciprocate and therefore puts relationships in jeopardy before they even begin. A structured business analysis interview is often a "first contact" situation for the business analyst and stakeholder. First impressions, forged in seconds, will make or break a reciprocal exchange, which could go on for a very long time.

We would be remiss if we did not understand the stakeholder both personally and professionally. We research stakeholders in two ways. First, we determine their salience within the organization and our requirements. Second, we explore who they are as people —what motivates and demotivates them, are there any special needs we should to be aware of, and what of their awareness of the upcoming change, their desire to help us, and any abilities they may have, which could be of value to our goals.

Ranking Stakeholders Using Salience

Within the context of requirements and project management, we understand salience in the following ways:

Psychological Salience

Business analysts must help their stakeholders focus the excessive demands on their perceptual and cognitive resources on the most pertinent information at the most suitable time. Stakeholders are very busy, and we must respect their time. The hippocampus participates in the assessment of salience and context using past memories to filter new incoming stimuli; placing those that are most important into long-term memory (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997). Therefore, we must take the time to filter information for our stakeholders.

Project Salience

Ronald K. Mitchell, Bradley R. Agle, and Donna J. Wood first used the term salience in project management in an article for *The Academy of Management Review* in 1997 (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997). Unlike the Power/Interest or Power/Influence grids, identified in both the *BABOK® Guide* and *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge, (PMBOK® Guide)—Fifth Edition*, the more complex Salience Model uses three measures to organize stakeholders: Power, Legitimacy, and Urgency. Each parameter, defined as follows, provides a dimensional way to understand project salience.

The Salience Model

Power: The ability a project stakeholder has to influence the outcome of an organization, its goals or projects, and project scope/deliverables.

Legitimacy: The actual authority or level of involvement project stakeholders have on a project.

Urgency: This third parameter is the time expected by project stakeholders for responses to their expectations. Adding this third dimension helps business analysts understand how to organize their interview activities, how to approach their issues, and what potential roadblocks stakeholders may put in the way. Table 2 clarifies the eight different salient types corresponding to each stakeholder type.

Table 1. Project Salience Table of Terms (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997)

1	Core	These are the critical project stakeholders. As a business analyst, we need to provide focused attention to these stakeholders. Interviews should be structured and well designed.
2	Dominant	These stakeholders have power and legitimacy but do not have urgency. Interview questions should focus on expectations.
3	Dependent	These project stakeholders have no real power on the project. Dependent stakeholders may align themselves with other more powerful stakeholders and, thus, must still me managed. Interview questions should focus around alliances.
4	Dangerous	These stakeholders have power and urgency but no legitimacy. They may force their views on project. When interviewing these stakeholders, it is important to determine their expectations to keep them suitably engaged and satisfied.
5	Latent	Latent stakeholders are present but not visible, apparent, or actualized until an event pulls them in such as the project entering recovery mode. Interviews for these stakeholders are to gain tactical information and potential risks.
6	Demanding	As the term suggests, demanding stakeholders believe their needs require immediate attention. Careful management is required. Business analysts must be sure to identify demands before they become issues. Multiple interviews are typically required.
7	Discretionary	Discretionary project stakeholders require little more than regular status updates.
8	Non-stakeholders	Non-stakeholders do not have an effect or are not affected. Thus, they are not stakeholders.

As Figure 1 outlines, our ultimate goal in an interview, or any engagement, is to merge the source data we obtain from our stakeholders with the contextual patterns that make up our everyday lives. A conceptual framework begins to take shape, and we can begin to understand which needs to address. We understand this conceptual framework in a logical, non-solution-specific and physical, solution-specific approach. The result is knowledge, which we can use to make strategic and tactical decisions. Over time, this knowledge becomes wisdom, which we share with others. Finally, when faced with new data, we reinforce our understanding of contextual patterns with the wisdom we have obtained.

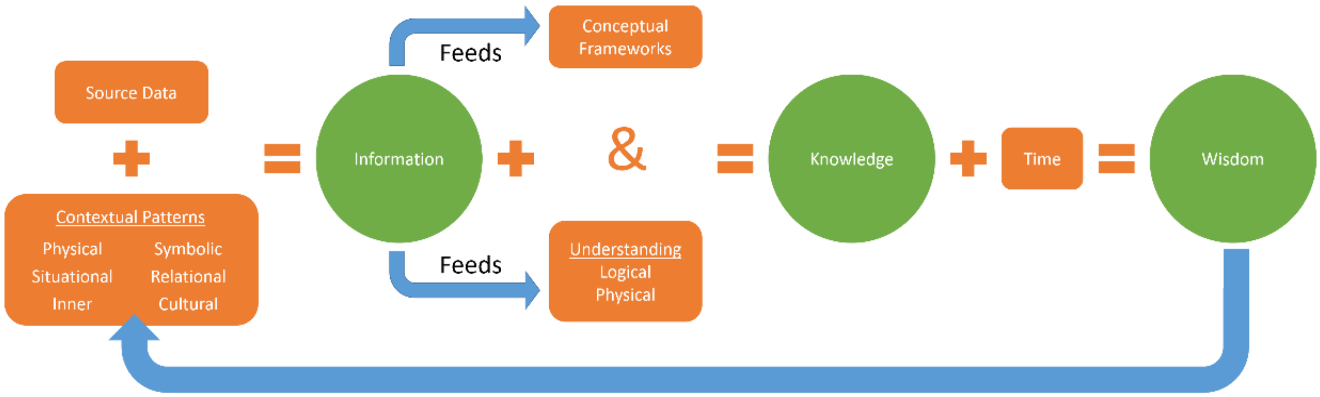

Figure 1. A Path to Project Wisdom

Other considerations when understanding stakeholder salience include:

- How is this person "measured" at work?
- What motivates this person?
- What are his or her primary responsibilities?
- Does this person experience peer pressure from his or her boss or colleagues?
- What does this person's boss expect from them?
- What seems to be important to this person?
- What personal responsibilities do they have?
- What is their basic personality type or social style?

Social Styles

The ability to identify patterns and their characteristics is central to the profession of business analysis. This capability applies to stakeholders as much as it does to anything under the magnifying glass of the business analyst. In their book *Personal Styles and Effective Performance*, Merrill and Reid (1981) identify four basic personality styles used today by educators, consultants, and analysts to help understand human relationships within a business context. This model, based on original research, balances the specificity needed for explanatory usefulness and the generality need for broad applicability (Merrill and Reid 1981). The model, known as the Caps Model of Personal Styles or CAPS, uses four distinct social styles: Controllers, Analyzers, Promoters, and Supporters.[1]

As individuals, we have a primary and a secondary style that we exhibit while in and out of our comfort zone. Proportionally, however, we express all four styles. Figure 2 reflects the Merrill-Reid model.

[1] Not to be confused with the CAP Theorem or the Cognitive-Affective Personality System.

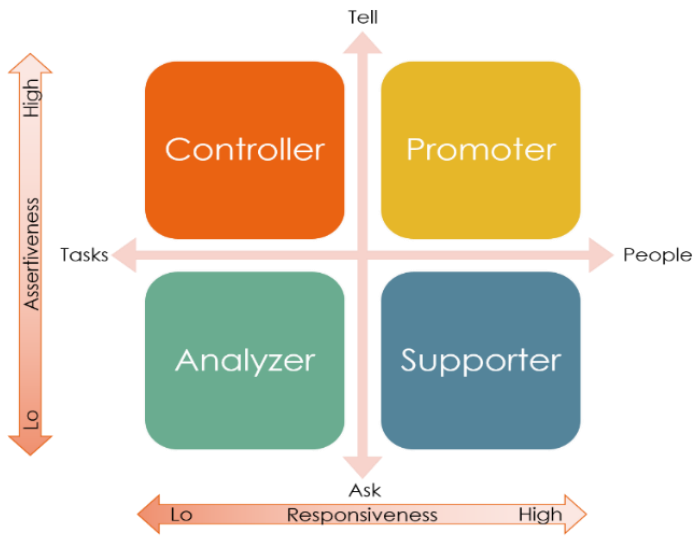

Figure 2. Social Styles (Merrill and Reid 1981)

Do's and Don'ts

Controller

Table 2. Social Styles Controller Do's and Don'ts (Merril and Reid 1981)

Do	Don't
Focus on the now	Focus on the long term
Be brief and efficient	Give too much detail
Get to the point quickly	Be ambiguous
Be results-oriented and give options	Limit options and omit results
Let them feel in control	Be adversarial
Keep social interaction to a minimum	Become personal
Focus on the matters at hand	Back down from a position

Promoter

Table 4. Social Styles Promoter Do's and Don'ts (Merril and Reid 1981)

Do	Don't
Look to the future	Go straight to business
Use stories to share ideas	Be detail-oriented
Seek input	Expect a liner path to solutions
Focus on the big picture	Dwell on minor details
Show personal interest and involvement	Be impersonal and distant
Express your creative self	Be embarrassed about creative behavior
Let them stand out	Try to take the spotlight/share

Analyzer

Table 5. Social Styles Analyzer Do's and Don'ts (Merril and Reid 1981)

Do	Don't
Focus on the present, the future, and the past	Be vague, illogical, and inconsistent
Stick to the facts/be able to back them up	Overlook past occurrences
Focus on the details	Be impatient regarding the details
Be linear, logical, and well organized	Be personal
Provide very specific direction	Rush to conclusions
Allow for careful consideration before action	Press for an immediate call to action
Be ready to show your evidence	Be too cavalier about important issues

Supporter

Table 6. Social Styles Supporter Do's and Don'ts (Merril and Reid 1981)

Do	Don't
Be traditional	Focus on work at the expense of social experience
Be flexible	Ask for a lot of details
Accept the social connection is more important	Be forceful or confrontational
Be easygoing, friendly, social, informal	Be too quick to change direction
Be courteous and receptive to courtesy	Focus on the now
Ensure a safe environment	"Attack"—emotions and ideas are intertwined
Be a protector	Avoid a logical argument. Instead, appeal to emotion.

Emotional Intelligence

Often considered the father of modern educational psychology, Edward Thorndike first described the concept of "social intelligence" as the ability to get along with other people (Kihlstrom and Cantor 2000). It was not until the innovative dissertation by then doctoral candidate Wayne Payne that the term emotional intelligence (EI) became part of our vocabulary (Payne 1985). Since then, Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer have been leading researchers on EI. In their influential article "Emotional Intelligence," they defined EI as "the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey and Mayer 1990). Psychologist Daniel Goleman was the first to argue a link between IQ and emotional quotient (EQ) in his internationally best-selling book *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). Goleman presented the argument that non-cognitive skills, such as empathizing with others, can matter as much as, if not more than, IQ. We believe that one can affect their emotional intelligence by improving the competencies seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Emotional Intelligence Model (Bradberry and Greaves 2009)

Although there are different models such as Salovey and Mayer's Ability Model or the Mixed Model introduced by Goleman, each stress that EI increases when we understand others and ourselves. Unlike personality and intelligence, which are more or less genetically fixed, EI—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management—improves with effort, as Figure 3 suggests Neary et al. (1998) express it best: "Emotional Intelligence is a way of recognizing, understanding, and choosing how we think, feel, and act. It shapes our interactions with others and our understanding of ourselves. It defines how and what we learn; it allows us to set priorities; and it determines the majority of our daily actions. Research suggests it is responsible for as much as 80% of the 'successes' in our lives." According to Bradberry and Greaves (2009), EI expresses personal and emotional competencies as:

Personal Competence

Competence is a harmonization of the elements needed to do something successfully or efficiently. When we are personally competent, we are able to manage our behavior in most situations and be accountable for our actions. Personal competence focuses on individual skill-sets within two sub-sections: self- awareness and self-management. Some of these skills include:

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is a foundational skill through which we develop other skills. Self-aware individuals understand the "ripples in the pond" effect. We effect our environment with our actions; self-aware individuals understand how their ripples affect other people and situations. The higher your self-awareness, the further your awareness of the ripple effect extends. Self-aware individuals:

- Trust their intuition and know what they do well
- Know areas they need to work on
- May keep a project or personal journal
- Are able to pull themselves out of the moment, slow down, and ask, "Why am I feeling this way?"
- Know what motivates and satisfies them and
- Know which people and situations trigger emotional responses

Self-Management

When we are managing ourselves well, we know when to act and when not to act; we are able to control our emotions and impulses. We control our emotions; our emotions do not control us. We happen to things; things do not happen to us. We are keenly aware that no one can "make us angry." We allow ourselves to become angry by what has happened or how someone has acted. Self-managed people:

- Regulate themselves well in most situations by directing behavior in positive ways
- Have a high level of personal accountability and manage tendencies over time
- Have a strong set of values and stick to and defend them
- Are thoughtful, considerate, respectful, and comfortable with change and think before they act

Social Competence

Social Competence is an externalized set of skills, which help us to identify all the nuances of human interaction, take what we know of ourselves, and then navigate and manage relationships effectively. Socially competent people understand that they cannot get their message across without first building trust and credibility. When we are socially competent, we are able to change our behavior to accommodate the needs of others even if we do not agree with their position. Socially competent people have achieved:

Social Awareness

- Set their own emotions aside and consider other perspectives
- Treat people with respect and dignity regardless of how they "feel" about them personally
- Separate the emotions from a discussion and focus on the matter at hand
- Listen well and quiet the "noise" going on inside their own minds
- Possess a high capacity to observe and understand the complexity of social interactions
- Stay focused, absorbing critical information and
- Remove distractions, when addressed, to give full attention to others

Relationship Management

- Effectively manage conflict
- Build lasting, meaningful relationships
- Have a strong sense of social responsibility extending beyond their local community
- Maintain a relationship and frequency of contact even in times of great stress and
- Always challenge themselves to improve interactions and stay away from old habits

The golden rule teaches us that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Travis Bradberry and Jean Greaves at The Good Men Project suggests there is a better approach to take when we want to understand our stakeholders:

> The Golden Rule—treat others as you want to be treated—has a fatal flaw: it assumes that all people want to be treated the same way. It ignores that vastly different things motivate people . . . The Platinum Rule—treat others as they want to be treated—corrects that flaw. (Bradberry and Greaves 2009)

Although this may seem slightly pandering, it is a recognition of who we are as a people. As Bradberry and Greaves suggest, if someone needs public recognition, give it to him or her. If they do not like to be the focus of attention, however, keep them from feeling uncomfortable. This idea maintains the importance of understanding the four basic personality styles and the structure of emotional intelligence. In addition, it also agrees with Belbin's Team Roles®.

In this paper, we dove into business analysis interview preparation techniques including identification and analysis of objectives, structures and stakeholders for a seamless interview. I have shown the importance of laying the interview groundwork as a necessary first step. Conducting the actual interview presents its own obstacles;

thereby it requires its own set of procedures. In my upcoming paper, I will discuss how to execute a perfect business analysis interview.

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About the Author

Perry McLeod is a management consultant, facilitator, and instructor, and author with over fourteen years of experience in business analysis, process reengineering, project management, business modeling, and strategic alignment. Perry delivers industry recognized best practices for some of North America's most successful companies across a number of industries such as banking and finance, agriculture, supply chain, consumer products, software design, insurance, and payment processing. In addition to his many professional accomplishments, Perry was one of the contributors to the IIBA's BABOK® v 2.0.