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How to Execute the Perfect Business Analysis Interview

How to Execute the Perfect Business Analysis Interview

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As I discussed in *Successful Business Analysis Interviews Hinge on the Prep Work*, the interview groundwork must be properly laid. That checklist includes: identifying the goals and objectives, completing stakeholder analysis, and choosing an interview structure to name but a few. Once that's complete, there are critical steps that must be taken in order to conduct a flawless business analysis interview.

Design the Event

Oftentimes stakeholders will use an interview as a means to defuse or "get things off of their chest," which is acceptable as long as the grievances and grumbles are planned, controlled, and contained. If they become inappropriate or too far out of the interview's scope, the business analyst must work to bring the interviewee back to the goals of the interview. When designing a structured business analyst interview, it's crucial to have a goal in mind, a clear set of questions planned, and an understanding of how those questions may deviate from the intended goal. An interview has an intended line of questioning; it may also have alternate lines of questioning and unanticipated paths where the interviewee has raised issues or answered questions in a way the business analyst had not considered or planned. In short, an interview is a social process.

Referring to the example in Figure 1, we can see the interview has an intended line of questioning but also has an intended follow-up. Along the way, unintended responses were either resolved or set aside. All concerns raised by the interviewee, addressed during the interview, or documented for follow-up after the interview or in a subsequent interview must leave the interviewee with a sense of closure. Use follow-ups with caution; stakeholders, such as managers, are busy and may be upset if more of their time is required. Table 1 presents a possible scenario to the Business Analysis Interview Design Structure seen in Figure 2.

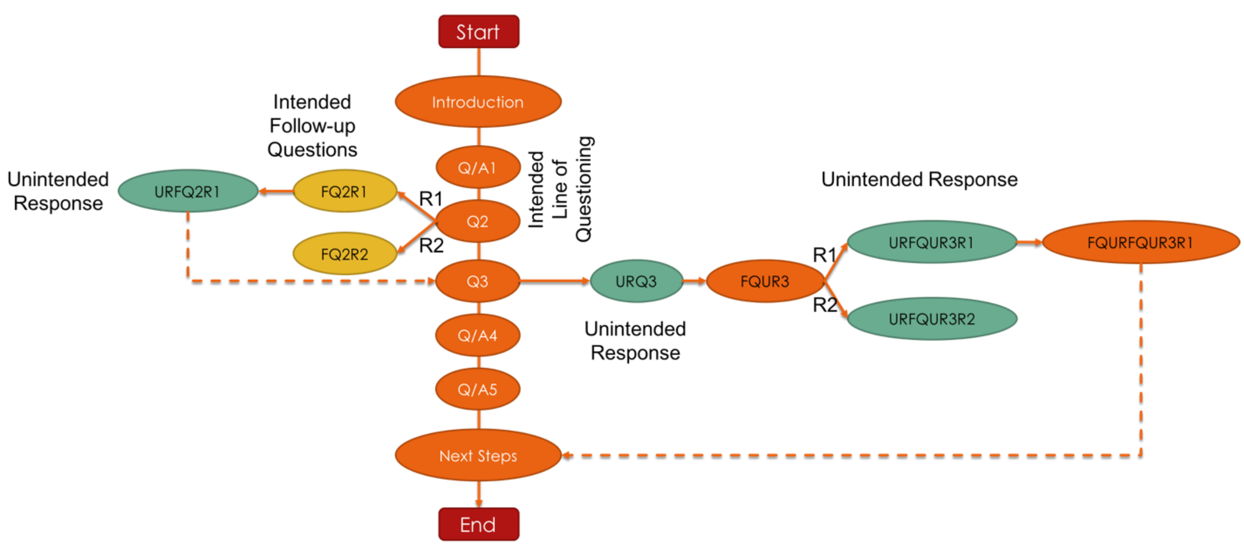

Figure 1. Business Analysis Interview Structure

Table 1. Business Analysis Interview Design Structure Path Description

Introduction	The business analyst and the interviewee spend a few minutes setting the tone of the interview by engaging in a social tête-à-tête and establishing some guidelines.
Q/A1: Question one and answer one	The first open-ended question formally sets the tone of the interview and inexorably leads to questions that are more important. The business analyst is satisfied with the answer and the interview proceeds according to plan.
Q2&R1: Question two and response one	The business analyst anticipates that there may be two different responses to question two and has planned for this by writing follow-up questions. In this scenario, response one is given.
FQ2R1: Follow-up question to response one	As expected, the interviewee has responded with an anticipated answer to question two. Prepared for this, the business analyst asks a follow-up question for the response given to question two.
URFQ2R1: Unintended response to follow up of question two's response one	The business analyst did not anticipate this response. He decides to continue with his planned line of questioning and suggests that they follow-up on that response at another time.
Q3: Question three	Question three is starting to get at the significant part of the issue at hand. This question might be sensitive and politically based.
URQ3: Unintended response to question three	The business analyst receives another unintended response and decides to leave the normal line of questioning and explore this new path further.
FQUR3: Follow-up question to the unintended response from question three	The new line of questioning continues to bring up surprises for the business analyst.
URFQUR3R1: Unintended response from follow-up question of unintended response to question three's response one	Responses continue to be unintended. The business analyst begins to suspect that he may need to book more interviews with different stakeholders to determine if this new information is consistent across the project team.
FQURFQUR3R1: Follow-up question to unintended response from follow-up question of unintended response to question three's response one	Realizing that time has run out, the business analyst asks his last question and continues to next steps and is likely planning how to proceed with this stakeholder.

Structure the Flow

As seen in Figure 1, the flow of an interview may become quite complex. The business analyst must keep excellent notes and in those notes trace the line of questioning for further analysis. This requires something more than a plan; it requires a design. Traditionally, the terms "plan," "planning," or "making a plan" are seen as overhead activities, unavoidable, or non-value-adding work, which force managers and team members to skip important project steps and compromise quality. "We don't have time to plan. Just do it!"—is the refrain we hear most often. The term "design," however, conjures up specific requirements needing fulfillment. A design is a:

- specification of an object,
- manifested by an agent,
- intended to accomplish goals,
- in a particular environment,
- using a set of primitive components,
- satisfying a set of requirements, which are
- subject to constraints.

In this context, the interview itself is the object under design.

Design the Questions

A major component of the interview's design is its questions. Each question has its own objective, which contributes to the overall goal of the interview. Stakeholders, eased into an interview using a technique that slowly builds the importance of the questions over time, feel more comfortable and more willing to divulge information. We use four basic types of questions to build this trust and credibility. Figure 2 and Table 2 demonstrate the four question types and their basic application.

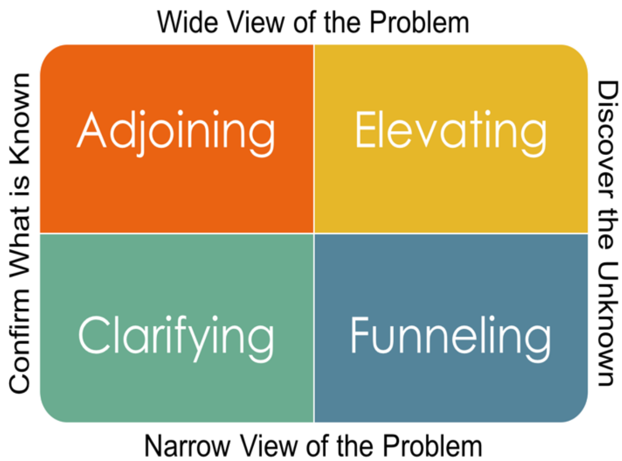

Figure 2. The Distributed Logical Firewall Is Enforced on Each vNIC

Table 2. The Four Basic Question Types (Pohlmann and Thomas 2015)

Clarifying Questions	Clarifying questions help understand what transpired so we can avoid making assumptions. Two monologues do not make a dialogue. It is important to remember not to speak over, past or through each other; waiting for the other to finish so you can say your piece. Ask clarifying questions (such as, "I believe you mean this" or "Let me see if I understand" to remain focused on the message your sender is trying to get across. A clarifying question will naturally lead to another follow-up question such as, "Please tell me more" or "Describe what that felt like."
Adjoining Questions	These questions explore related and ignored aspects of the problem related to the dialogue. There are many types of contexts; here we can use modal verbs to ask questions which explore different contexts. In linguistics, we use modal verbs or auxiliaries, which provide additional help and support to the messages we are trying to convey. Words like "can," "could," "shall," "should," "will," "would," "may," "might," and "must" indicate likelihood, permission, obligation, and ability. Sentences that uses these terms can help us obtain more information and gain a better understanding of our sender's intent.
Funneling Questions	Funneling questions dive deeper into responses. Why was that answer given and not another? What assumptions will we challenge? What are the root causes? Exploring and sometimes challenging our senders with questions such as, "why did you do it this way," or what was the method you followed," compel our sender to reason conically and funnel their thoughts into the details of their message. This line of questioning can take us from a contextual or conceptual analysis to a physical one, which is helpful in process re-engineering.
Elevating Questions	These questions raise broader issues and highlight the bigger picture. Elevating questions help us zoom out because it is harder to see the overall context and patterns driving it when you completely immersed yourself in the problem space. Example questions include "Taking a step back, what are the larger issues?" or "Are we even addressing the right question?" Think of this as a reverse conical analysis. Here we want to focus on context and identify patterns which we can use to relate to our own problem space.

A classical work environment often rewards those who answer questions and not those who ask them. Questioning conventional wisdom can even lead too sideling, isolation, or even threats (Pohlmann and Thomas 2015). The business analyst must be courageous and be willing to take a line of questioning wherever it needs to go. Do not plan—design! Design your requirements, design your workshops, and design your interviews.

What to Talk About

There are three concepts to understand when considering what questions to ask and how to ask them. The business analyst must first identify the source of the interview—what is driving this conversation? Next, the business analyst must decide what to focus his or her attention on, followed by what perspective they want to take and how deep the conversation will go. The Requirements, Elicitation, Planning, Analysis and Collaboration Framework seen in Figure 3 provides an insight into what concepts must be considered when designing what to talk about.

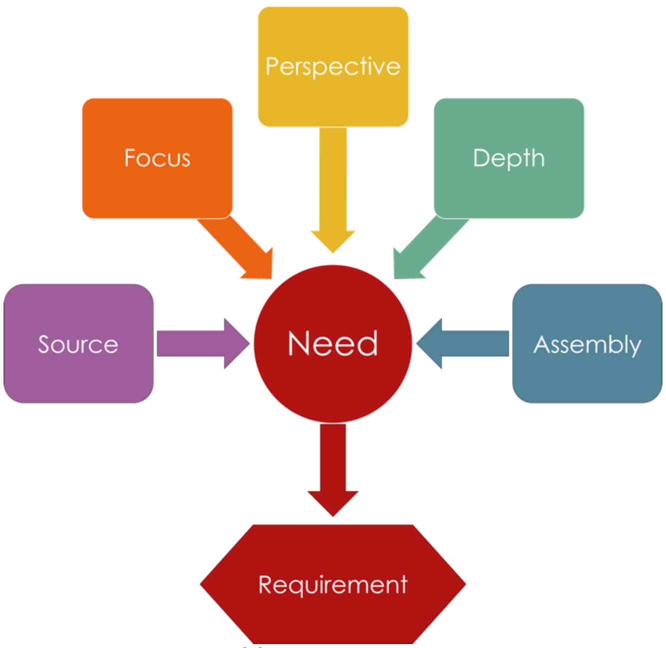

Figure 3. REPAC Meta Model

Focus on What Matters

The Requirements Elicitation, Planning, Analysis, and Collaboration Framework provides thousands of possible subject, perspective, and depth permutations, which takes the guesswork out of determining what conversations should take place and when. Figure 4 gives us an overview of what concepts are important for focus. Useful for many other applications such as planning a workshop, REPAC helps business analysts navigate the myriad paths requirements management processes take. Figure 5 looks at focus options on the organization itself while Figure 6 illustrates perspective options for the organization.

Figure 4. REPAC Elements of Focus

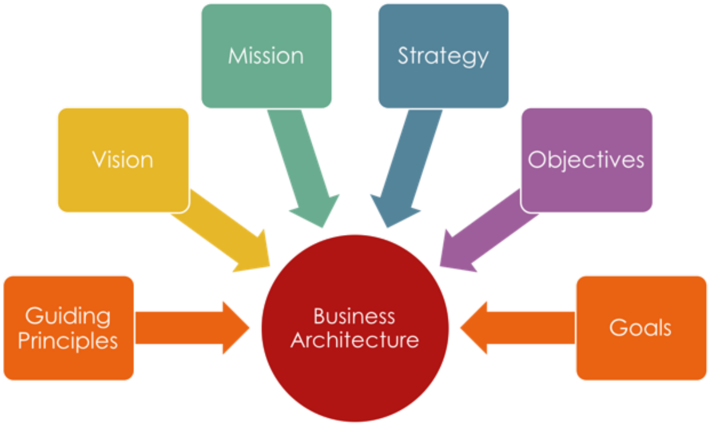

Figure 5. Focus on the Organization

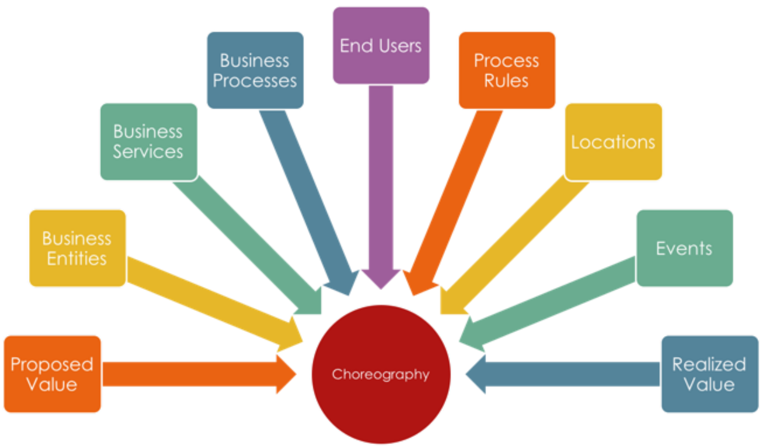

Figure 6. Organizational Domain Perspective

Use a Linear, Logical Approach

This technique helps to plot interview questions across a normal distribution curve. The statistical terms "Mu" and "Sigma" symbolize the mean and the standard deviation, respectively, of a probability distribution, which is how the line of questioning technique is applied. In probabilistic terms, the interviewee is more likely to answer the questions you need answered on the upswing of a normal curve, than they are on the downswing. Interviews can be emotional, intense, or politically changed events. Allowing for a natural decrease in importance and intensity creates a stronger sense of closure. In this model, the questions' level of importance would increase at a steady rate until the critical questions, once asked and answered, would bring the interview down to a natural conclusion and sense of closure. Figures 7-9 demonstrate this process.

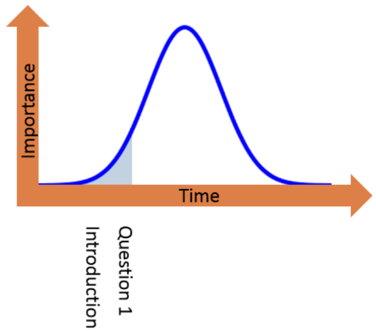

Figure 7. Line of Questioning Curve One

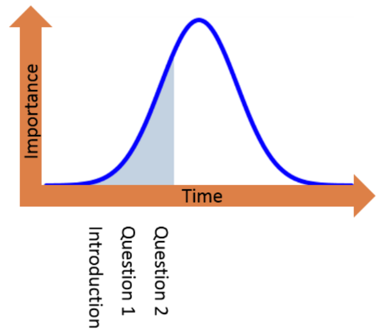

Figure 8. Line of Questioning Curve Two

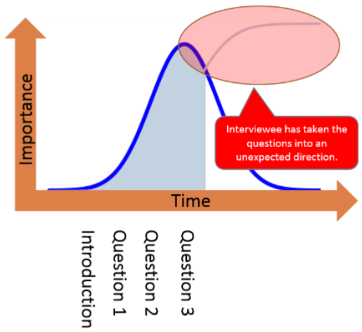

Figure 9. Line of Questioning Curve Three

Following the examples below, the introduction and the first question open up the lines of communication. As the interview precedes, the importance of the questions increase at a steady pace, which allow the interviewer and the interviewee to ease into the subject matter at a natural pace. Recall back to Figure 1 and compare it to Figure 10. Here we can see that the interviewee has escalated the line of questioning, creating a disjointed curve similar to the simulated interview structure purposed in Figure 11. Figure 10 represents an unexpected direction for the business analyst. Best practice tells us the business analyst must do their best to prepare for this, by researching the topics at hand as well as the stakeholder's personality.

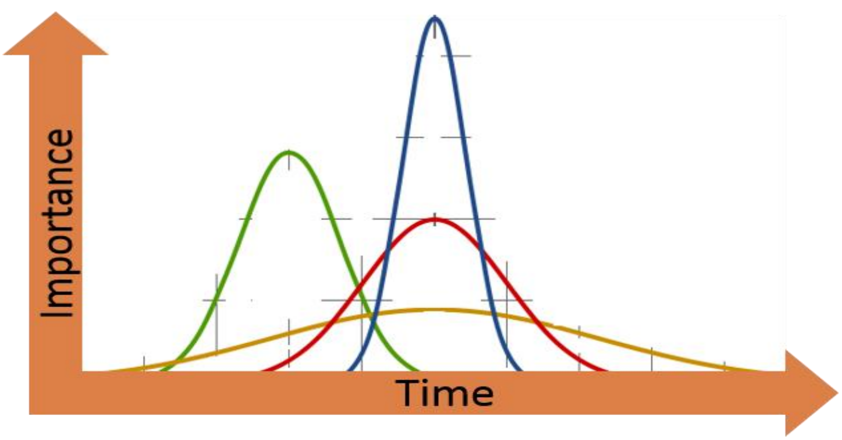

Figure 10. Disjointed Information Curve

The Pre-Interview

An important step to a successful interview is setting up a safe, trustworthy, and credible environment. Setting up a pre-interview with the stakeholder, either by phone, text, in person, or by whatever mode seems appropriate, often helps to clarify issues, refine the interviewer's objectives, and begin the process of building credibility and trust. A good interview is about:

- Establishing rapport
- Situational awareness
- Helping the stakeholder understand delayed reciprocity
- Encouraging honesty
- Asking the right questions and encouraging dialogue
- Active listening

- Summarizing and consolidating what you have heard
- Managing bias and
- Trouble shooting difficult situations

The pre-interview is a simple but important step. Take the time to understand your stakeholder on a personal and professional level.

If possible, meet face-to-face to introduce yourself, briefly discuss the interview, and ensure the interviewee fully understands their purpose. If a face-to-face is not possible, arrange some other mode such as text messaging or a telephone call. Do not give the interviewee a list of your questions; just introduce them to the ideas you wish to cover. If the stakeholder is not willing to discuss a certain topic, it is best to remove it from the interview and discuss the matter with the project manager and sponsor.

The Interview

Understanding Context

The most important influence on how we interpret messages is context and the patterns within. The interview itself is an exchange of packets of raw data in the form of verbal and non-verbal packets. We give this raw data meaning through context. It is not surprising that some aspects of context link back to emotional intelligence. We understand communication exchanges by becoming aware of the six groupings of context. Each of the six types of context are present in all communication; however, depending on the situation, some will have influence over others. The six groupings of contextual understanding are:

Physical Context

Physical context includes the material objects surrounding the communication exchange and any other physical features that influence communication (e.g., furniture and how it is arranged, size of the room, colors, temperature, other people in the room, time of day, light source, etc.). Some, such as temperature or room color, play a large role in learning, retention, and even behavior.

Inner Context

Inner context, or our inner-self, includes all of the thoughts, sensations, and emotions going on inside of the interviewer or interviewee that may influence how they act toward each other or interpret the data-packets exchanged. Anger, disgust, fear, joy, and sadness tend to be the emotions we discuss the most. During a formal interview, however, the business analyst should make him or herself aware of the full catalogue of human emotions. Figure 11, Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions, provides a very easy to follow model that can be used as reference (Plutchik 2003). Tables 3 and 4 discuss the model’s design.

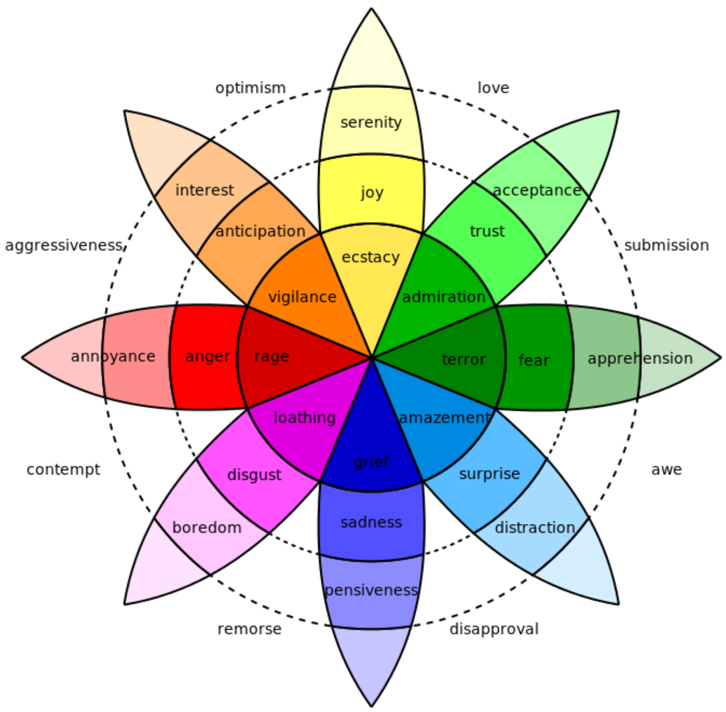

Figure 11. Plutchik's Wheel of Emotions (Plutchik 2003)

Table 3. Basic Emotions (Plutchik 2003)

Basic	Basic Opposite
Joy	Sadness
Trust	Disgust
Fear	Anger
Surprise	Anticipation

Table 4. Advanced Emotions (Plutchik 2003)

Human feelings (Results of Emotions)	Feelings	Opposite
Optimism	Anticipation + Joy	Disapproval
Love	Joy + Trust	Remorse
Submission	Trust + Fear	Contempt
Awe	Fear + Surprise	Aggression
Disapproval	Surprise + Sadness	Optimism
Remorse	Sadness + Disgust	Love
Contempt	Disgust + Anger	Submission
Aggressiveness	Anger + Anticipation	Awe

Symbolic Context

Symbolic context includes all verbal and non-verbal messages occurring before, during, or after a communication event that influence the interviewer or interviewee in their actions or understandings of the event. Some examples include previous discussions or interviews, previous workshops, or other engagements where both or one of the members were present.

Relational Context

Relational context is the personal, formal, or informal relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. A poor relational context prevents effective communication regardless of other contextual considerations. Humans are social primates, and work is a highly social institution. Numerous studies have shown diminished life expectancy where social bonds are absent.

Building successful relationships is a complicated process. Nevertheless, we must recognize our relational affiliations with our communication partners. We do not have to like the people we work with, but we must acknowledge them as thinking, feeling people. We do not have to respect everyone's ideas, but we must recognize them. We must have the social maturity to accept our relational contexts for what they are and not let them interfere with the communication or learning process. Of course, when we take the time to build affinities, which are productive, positive, and lasting, the results are always favorable.

Situational Context

When we think about context, situational context sadly tends to be the first and only context considered. Situational context is what the people who are communicating think of as (label) the event they are involved in—what we call the act we are engaged in (e.g., attending a lecture, taking part in an interview, part of a workshop, at work, taking part in a use case building session, etc.). Typically, when asked for "context" about a situation we tend to ignore the other contexts mentioned here and only focus on the situation—thereby leaving an unclear picture.

Cultural Context

The last context to consider when understanding the meaning of a message is the cultural and sub-cultural context of the message. When we consider the expressions, rules, and patterns our society teaches us about verbal and non-verbal communication, we are considering cultural context. Societies that share similar cultures or cultural history tend to have a much easier time communicating. Oftentimes, however, business analysts find themselves working on collocated and dispersed teams that do not share similar cultures. To make matters worse, these teams must communicate using modes that do not offer an observation of non-verbal cues, which creates other contextual challenges.

Establishing Rapport

The first task in successful interpersonal relationships is building rapport. Building rapport is all about matching ourselves with another person. From the French verb *rapporter* meaning “to bring back,” rapport establishes common values, beliefs, knowledge, or behaviors around work and non-work-related subjects. Creating a common ground puts the interviewer and interviewee at ease and helps to couch the pain of delayed reciprocity. Some examples of ways to build rapport include:

- Identify common ideas and interests to open the interview.
- Use nonthreatening project related topics for initial small talk.
- Listen to what the other person is saying and look for shared experiences or circumstances.
- Inject a small amount of humor about the project. Be careful not to offend.
- Be aware and respond to nonverbal cues from yourself and the interviewee.

Make sure the interviewee feels included but not interrogated during the interview. Put the stakeholder at ease. This will enable you to relax and the conversation to progress at a comfortable rate.

Situational Awareness

Situational awareness takes critical thinking and the ability to be aware of what is happening in the vicinity in order to understand how information, events, and one's own actions will affect goals and objectives both immediately and in the near future. As the business analyst works through the interview, myriad things are happening around them. Communication and understanding are complicated human endeavors. Many of us explain issues by telling stories filled with metaphors and hidden meaning. The business analyst would be remiss if he or she did not take the time to be mindful of all the non-verbal nuances happening while the interviewee tells his or her story.

Reciprocity and Fair Exchange

Reciprocity is simply responding to a positive action with another positive action based on an agreed upon exchange which is/should be fair to both parties. Without trust and fair exchange, reciprocity focuses on the unequal profit obtained from the concept of reciprocal concessions. Delayed reciprocity is a little more complicated in that it asks for something now in exchange for something later (or in some cases, much, much later!) As business analysis professionals, many of the things we ask for in terms of a solution are not returned for many weeks, months, or even years. This creates a cloud of distrust when compared with past experiences. Depending on the circumstances, this may be an issue for the interviewee.

Encouraging an Honest Dialogue

About two-thirds of all human dialogue is gossip (Dunbar 1996). It is in our nature to talk about other people. Anthropologically, this behavior serves as a "verbal-grooming" equivalent to the social grooming seen in other primates. When not of a malicious nature, "verbal-grooming" serves to reinforce social relationships (Fox 2002). It is important, however, to verify gossip within the interview setting. Figure 12 provides some insight on how to interpret gossip.

Figure 12. The Interrogatives of Gossip (Critical Thinking Asylum 2009)

Active Listening

Often used in counseling and conflict resolution, active listening is the most important skill for a business analyst to possess. How well we listen has a major impact on our effectiveness and on the quality of our relationships with others. As we have already covered in Emotional Intelligence, good communication skills require a high level of self-awareness. By understanding our personal style of communicating, we will go a long way toward creating good and lasting impressions with others.

Managing Bias

Business analysts must ensure the information obtained through an interview is indicative of the actual situation rather than an artifact of the interview or the individual interviewee's perceptions. Interviewee responses, biased by the actual interview situation itself, lead business analysts in the wrong direction, and potentially cause weeks of delay. Specifically, interviews are conducive to people receiving attention and feeling heard and validated. Stakeholders may also alter their own perceptions of their current situation and prime themselves to give biased responses that are disproportionately positive or negative. Referred to as the Hawthorne Effect, this temporary phenomenon—first discovered from data collected during a factory study to determine if workers would become more or less productive with an adjustment in light levels—had some unexpected results. As a side effect, the workers taking part in the study did increase their productivity but not through any change in factory luminosity. As a result of the attention they were receiving from the study itself, their productivity noticeably increased (Noland 1959).

Managing Conflict

Oddly, when we consider conflict, images of people screaming at each other or emotionally hijacked words of discomfort, tension, and crisis tend to come to mind. These concepts refer to how we deal with conflict, which tends to be fallacious and illogical. Conflict in of itself is just a difference of opinion. Our inability to manage conflict using rational arguments, emotional intelligence, contextual thinking, and other concepts proposed in this paper reduce the conflict to fights forcing our brains into a fight-or-flight mode, which severely limits rational thought.

Fights and arguments are two words used synonymously but could not be further apart. We all know that a fight is a disagreement based not on rational thought but rather on an emotional position. Fights, filled with gainsaying, fallacious thinking, and emotional hijacking, seldom do anyone any good. Argumentation, on the other hand, is reason giving. Argumentation, the gateway to effective reasoning, is an essential skill for any business analyst.

According to Merriam Webster, argumentation is the "act or process of forming reasons (based on inference and logic) and of drawing conclusions and applying them to a case in discussion." Consider argumentation as a means to justify claims where absolute proof is unavailable. Reasons are the justifications we give for our claims. Without reasonable discourse, we will give into sentiments in a "knee-jerk fashion," on a whim or caprice, or at the command of an authority figure. We keep arguments clean and reasonable by:

- Fully understanding our claims, assumptions, or premises
- Determining the method, we will use for our line of reasoning
- Building an argument on a set of successive predicts which inexorably lead to one (and only one) conclusion or point

It would seem, therefore, that our first step to manage conflict is to remove the emotional ingredient. A difficult task indeed considering most of us do not have training in rational thought, and we tend to give into emotional hijacking.

The Follow-Up

It is important for the interviewer to organize the information and confirm results with the interviewees as soon as possible after the interview. Sharing the information learned allows the interviewees to point out any missed or incorrectly recorded items (*BABOK® Guide* 2015). If all has gone well, the interview follow-up is a straightforward matter. Interviewing is a very effective way to capture information from stakeholders who have specialized information or a unique perspective. It takes a great deal of time to prepare and conduct the perfect interview. Thus, the follow-up is the step where we ensure we got what we needed, satisfied any needs that the stakeholder had, built some trust, credibility, and rapport, and have a clear direction. At the end of an interview, be sure to:

- Thank the interviewee for their time
- Discuss plans to address anything that might not have been covered in the interview
- Let the interviewee know that you will provide a rough transcript of the interview for their approval,
- Advise them if you anticipate needing their time again in the future
- Formally end the interview with a positive comment, related to the matters at hand

As the interview begins to come down from the curve, give the interviewee a chance to volunteer additional data to ensure they have "said their piece." End the interview by summarizing the main points. This gives us a chance to review our notes and ensure that we understood everything. Once again, thank the interviewee for their time and remember not to pander. Let the interviewee know when you plan to summarize the interview notes and submit them for approval. Doing so just after the interview, while it is fresh in everyone's mind, will make for accurate results. The review and feedback process will improve the quality of the notes and may provide important clarifications.

Conclusion

Always prepare to interview stakeholders by reading background documentation first. This technique, known as document analysis, will be the basis for all interview-planning efforts. Every interview is unique; however, there are some key items to remember if planning the perfect interview is the goal:

- Is the pre-interview research complete?
- Do they or we need context? What type?
- Will the interview be formal or informal?
- What are the goals and objectives?
- What do we know about our stakeholder, professionally and personally?
- What is their salience within the organization and the project?
- Will we plot a normal curve, allowing for a natural progression?
- What will our questions focus on, what perspective and depth will they take on?
- How will we respond to unexpected questions?
- Are we using a liner and logical approach?
- Have we taken time to establish rapport?
- Are we sure, the interviewee is fully aware of the situation?
- Do we have an honest dialogue?
- Are we listening actively?
- Are we managing bias—theirs and ours?
- Do we understand how to manage conflict, should it arise?
- Have we agreed on next steps?
- Have we closed the interview with professionalism?

An interview is about doing the right research, asking the right questions of the right person within the correct context, and listening for the right response; it takes a lot of concentration and determination to be an active listener. Not all interviews will require this much assiduousness, but when they do, a careful, methodical, and persistent approach will go a long way to building credibility and trust.

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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.*