

Dave

Adrian, welcome back. It's great to have you on the show again.

Adrian

Always a pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Dave

Absolutely. Adrian, a lot of what I see today, there's a lot of chatter and discussions about business agility. And I wonder if we could talk a little bit about business agility today and how that relates to business analysis.

Adrian

Yeah, it's kind of been the year, a year to talk about business agility when you think about it, because obviously we're recording this in a time of Covid where lots of organizations have had to adapt very quickly to remote working or to new ways of working or to new regulations and social distancing. And if you think about business agility, for me, the essence of it is for an organization to be able to sense its external environment, really work out what's significant and then respond to it.

Adrian

And I think you need all of those three things for an organization to be really agile, it needs to see what's changing. It needs to work out how it needs to change and, then it needs to actually do it. And if there's a disconnect to any one of those points, then it kind of fails, because if you can kind of see what's coming, if you are driving a car, you can see a curve, but you don't turn the steering wheel, then you're going to crash. And it's kind of the same with organizations. You see organizations that see there is a strategic problem, something they really need to do, but they can't quite configure themselves to respond to it. And for me, I think business analysis is central to that, because you think about sensing and seeing what's coming. There's a huge amount of strategic business analysis that fits into that space. You think about assessing how to change. Well there's a lot of solution evaluation or problem solving or understanding that fits in that space.

Adrian

And then the traditional project or product business analysis skills fit in there as well. And of course, what I'm saying, an organization needs to change. The reality is the organizations can't actually change themselves. It's the people, of course. It's an organization, is a group of people. So I think we are one of the disciplines that can really help build business agility into the fabric of what an organization goes along with others, like architects, product people, project managers and the like.

Dave

Right. Now it sounds like you're differentiating business agility from agile or even big 'A' Agile in that you're talking about seeing what's coming up, being able to adapt very quickly to the changing needs and continue to provide value. Is that where you're going?

Adrian

Yeah, I think that's a really good distinction. And again, I do think different people use these terms slightly differently. But for me, agile in the way that it's commonly used, particularly in software development or product development, tends to be attributed to a way of working where very often iterative, exploratory way of building a product; scrum is a typical example, of course, of an agile method. But most agile approaches are fantastic, really, really good at helping teams to figure out what they want to build on the product or to help shape and iteratively get customer feedback on a product at some level there's sort of an assumption that you know what product you're building.

Adrian

And it's kind of like if you think about backlogs and it doesn't really matter whether it's Scrum or DSDM or one of the many other approaches out there, that most of them have some form of backlog in them. And it's like, well, how do you even begin to know what to put in that backlog and how do you get coherence in that backlog? There are contradictory features in there. And so, of course, maintaining the backlog becomes important.

Adrian

But business agility is almost for me if you think about it being like a layer of abstraction above that saying, well, hang on a minute, what products do we need to build here? What direction does the organization need to be taking? So agile as a set of methods is one way of actually implementing the changes. But someone in the organization needs to decide what those changes are. And it's the business agility that for me is that high level of abstraction.

Dave

And I used to say that the promise of Agile is the ability to turn on a dime for a dime. And for those outside of the US, a dime is a small coin. So that means be able to pivot very quickly for a very low cost. And part of that is understanding the ecosystem around you, being able to see what's coming, being able to learn and adapt as you go. So we have to be able to do things that allow us to pivot very quickly and very cheaply.

Adrian

Yeah, absolutely, and I think but business agility and agile in terms of agile methods do have those shared characteristics like looking outwards. And if you were in an agile team developing a product or tweaking software or whatever, really there ought to be regular customer feedback, regular customer showcases and use of prototype to really make sure that we're building something that the customers are going to use. And I think business agility takes that up a level, having the strategic conversations about and which customer segments should we be targeting and what are the next threats that are coming in our environmental landscape.

Dave

What can business analysts or other similar professionals do to enable this business agility?

Adrian

I think there's a lot in if you look in IIBA's BABOK a lot of what the strategic business analysis knowledge area is getting at. It starts to touch on business agility. And I think if you think about those sort of three elements that I talked about, so sensing the change that is going to happen or might happen or could possibly happen next, what we're really talking about there is what we might call external environment analysis. And many of us will be familiar with techniques like . . . well various flavors of PESTLE or STEEPLE, or if anyone listening isn't familiar with STEEPLE, it's just an acronym which stands for social, technological, economic, environmental, political, legal, and ethical.

Adrian

In fact, calling STEEPLE a technique is too grand; it's just a set of letters. It's just a mnemonic or an acronym. But it's a great way of scanning the environment and saying, what social cultural trends might affect maybe the whole organization or maybe a department? Because we're probably not often analyzing the whole organization, but we might be analyzing department or marketplace business unit, but also then using it almost like for scenario analysis to say what social cultural changes might happen.

Adrian

And the weird thing is, I remember speaking to someone and I really wish I could remember who it was, but I was saying that although no one could really predict a pandemic, although people have written about pandemics, but he was saying that he had done some work shortly before lockdown or the first lockdown where they were talking about, well, what if there is a zombie apocalypse? Everyone knows there's not going to be a zombie apocalypse. But actually, if you prepare for something that seems so unlikely, something like a pandemic, you can't access the office you're already prepared for.

Adrian

And if you think about organizations that had a proper business continuity and disaster recovery plan in place, they probably weren't having that because they thought their entire organization would have to run

dispersed because of the pandemic. That thinking had already been done. Someone predicted that there's a there's a possible threat that the organization needs to be able to respond to. So using tools like that to think about what's happening, what's likely and what might happen that the organization needs to respond to.

Adrian

The thing I think about STEEPLE and tools like it personally is it's often written about as if it's always going to be high level strategy. It's going to be like the top CEOs doing this analysis. And I find it I do it on project teams as well, because you can kind of think, well, hang on a minute, what might change out in the world, which might have an impact on how this project runs or how this product will incrementally change?

Adrian

And so I think if you imagine an onion, it applies the different layers of the onion. So for the sensing those sorts of strategic analysis tools and then I think also actually understanding root causes, which is something we I think we naturally do as BAs, but making sure that people don't fall for that shiny piece of tech that they just want to buy because it's cool. We must have an app for that. Really? Do our customers really want an app? Those kind of conversations.

Now, understanding what's going on outside our organization or even internal; it can be "what if the priorities of this department changes or what if we lose this key person" or whatever. That to me speaks to systems thinking, understanding the upstream, downstream impacts all the pieces that are at work in a delivery system. How do we get to a point where we look at the systems? I mean, should BAs be system thinkers and look at this? It sounds like it's pretty complex to understand the environment you're working in.

Dave

How do you even do that? Do I have to read journals and look at the news every day? Is this something where BAs should really play a role?

Adrian

Yeah, great point. And I think 'yes' is the short answer. The longer answer is I think BAs as a community, I think we all do. And systems thinking is another really interesting lens on business agility. For anyone that's listening who's not familiar with systems thinking, there are so many different traditions, there are different lineages of systems thinking. But personally, I tend to think of systems thinking as thinking in systems. So for me, it's almost the thinking is the important bit.

Adrian

We might talk about something like the health system, but by talking about the health system, different people have different definitions of where those boundaries mean, where it starts and stops. Like is a taxi driver who occasionally is employed to deliver medicine between two departments are they part of the system? Well, that might be a really interesting conversation to have. If there's a problem where the medicine isn't getting there on time or isn't getting to the right place.

Adrian

So you can you can start to have discussions around that. I also think it's interesting because if you think about thinking systems and thinking holistically, that starts to lead to conversations about complexity and a crazy example. But those in the city. I live in Portsmouth, on the south coast of the UK, not far from me, towards the sea front there's a fountain and it's switched off at the moment because everything's switched off. And it fascinated me when it was first built, because when there's wind, it stops and it stops because it would splash people who are standing around.

Adrian

And I was fascinated as to how it does this. And I eventually realized that hidden away off to the side is a little wind turbine thing. And what it does is when it rotates in the wind, when it reaches a certain level, that must send the signal to the power to the jets or whatever. And it's a really cool design. But that system, if we want to call it that, if we imagine that was sort of like a fountain system, that that's very good at doing the one thing it's designed for in the context and the environment is being designed for.

Adrian

For example, if there was a very strong gale or a hurricane, it wouldn't work because the thing would break. And from that point onwards, there would just be constant water. If the sea breached the sea defenses and flooded, it wouldn't work because the electrics would short out. The reason I mention that crazy example is quite often I think we think about designing processes. We design processes for the way that the world is and used to be, and we standardize them.

Adrian

And we write process and procedure manuals, but nobody really thinks about how they can adapt. So when something like Covid happens or some competitive threat comes along, we've not necessarily built variety into the processes. We sort of lean down all of the slack sometimes and there can be times when that's necessary. But systems thinking would encourage us to look more holistically and to recognize the complexity and to think about how the environment might change. And I think business analysis is a really, really cool part of that.

Dave

Yeah, that's a great point. And I think even going beyond some of those extreme examples and black swan events, what if you just look within your organization and you're doing a project or working on a product and you're not aware of something going on in your organization, another project or product is going to influence what you're doing. I've been part of a lot of organizations where we complete a project and two months later something changes from another project that undoes what we did, so that awareness across the organization of what's going on.

Dave

I often say, hey, we have a business analysis community practice. Why don't we talk about all that's going on in the organizations that we can share that information, say, wait, if you're doing that, that's going to affect my project. Let's have a discussion.

Adrian

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, one of the funniest examples that I ever saw was I was working on a project or on the periphery of work on a project in the financial services organization where there was part of the operation was outsourced to third party administrator and they were changing from one to another. I then found out a different part of the organization is running almost exactly the same project, but changing the other way. One was going from party A to party B, the other was going from party B to party A and I said hang on a minute, this can't make commercial sense, you'll get a better deal, surely, if the organization sticks with one.

Dave

So, Adrian, as we think about business agility and especially around that systems thinking topic, what can we do about that? You mentioned some of the techniques in the BABOK. What are some tools or techniques or approaches that we can use to really become systems thinkers?

Adrian

Yeah, so many. What I would say is do a YouTube search and watch some videos because I'll mention some techniques. But there's so much stuff out there. Some particular favorites of mine that I use in a business analysis context. One is a multiple cause diagram. If you've ever drawn, as I'm sure we all have a fish bone diagram, a multiple cause diagram is sort of like a fish bone diagram with just less structure. You've just got arrows pointing, all brainstorm out all the potential causes of some negative event that's happened and trace them back.

Adrian

But it also acknowledges that there will be different perspectives. Different people have different views on why something's happened. So you can start to overlay those and cultivate a conversation. I was so

pleased when I discovered that technique because I found in the past I'm almost forcing stuff into the categories on a fish bone. So multiple cause, diagram.

Rich pictures. When I first came across rich pictures. I was quite skeptical, but then I really started using them. And if anyone listening has never heard of a rich picture, you've probably used one without even knowing it. If you've got round a white board whether that's a real one or a virtual whiteboard and just said, let's draw the problem. A rich picture is trying to make a mental model explicit to have a conversation with others about it. So I find myself drawing a lot. I'm no artist. It doesn't matter. Stick people, lines, and arrows.

Causal loops. These feed on from multiple cause diagrams, really. But you can start to understand feedback loops and a perception of why certain things might be occurring. You get that sort of fire-fighting doom loop that occurs in some organizations like, well, we never patch any of our servers until the last minute. So we're always having critical defects or things are going out of support because we don't do the maintenance and get that doom loop with everyone's firefighting. STEEPLE, as already mentioned. The other thing I'd mention, and there's a whole bunch of techniques around this, is really understanding who the customer is of a product or service, a process.

Adrian

And it's often more complex than it looks, because you start to think, well, who's paying for this, but also who's benefiting from it. And those two people can be quite different. I spent a fair amount of my career in the insurance industry, and you've got like, well, who is the customer? Is it the person paying for the insurance policies is it the person driving the car that's covered by it?

Adrian

Is it the third party who's making a claim? Is it the windscreen company that's coming out to replace? All of those have relationships and they want different things and the underlying processes actually have to meet the needs of all of them. So I think also that spreading the net wider for stakeholders and customers is so, so very, very important as well. And something we do really well as BAs.

Dave

If there's one thing that listeners can do to either become more of a system thinker or something to enable better business agility in their organization, what would your advice be?

Adrian

Yeah, I think it would be don't be afraid to look outside of the box that the organization thinks that they have put you in. And I know that sounds flippant, but I think sometimes I've certainly felt this. There are times when, particularly when projects or initiatives are busy and you're being asked to do something and it just doesn't feel right. But you're under pressure and that doesn't feel like a good time to descent.

Sometimes that's the most important time to pause, have a deep breath and think, hang on a minute, do I need to put my attention elsewhere or do I need to look externally outside of the department that's currently focusing on this change, do I need to look outside of the organization at what's happening and constructively report back to say, look, we can absolutely do this, but what I notice is that there are some changes in legislation coming in that's going to affect this. And our biggest competitor is just done this. Does this affects what we're doing here?

Adrian

Although it's quite scary to do, I've found people genuinely quite grateful for the insight, particularly (and I think we do this all the time) when we give it to them and they can take it, they can have the credit. All we're really interested in is making sure the right outcome is there. I don't know many BAs who particularly like the limelight.

Dave

Right. And that's great advice. I think one of the BA superpowers is to be in deep in the details and understand where we're going, but then really pull up and get that overhead view of everything going on and everything that touches what they're working on and then be able to zoom back down. And I think, frankly, a stakeholder who you came to and said, hey, I notice there's some new legislation coming up or Department X is doing this, how does that affect us?

Dave

I think they'd be really impressed with someone who comes to them and brings that kind of information to them.

Adrian

Yeah, because it lightens their load because it's something that they probably should do and they probably want to do, but they've probably got twenty five thousand other things to do. And you know what it's like whenever anyone takes work away or makes life easier. I think that's one thing that it's easy to forget is people like people who are easy to work with and people like working with people who make their lives easier. And I have found it scary to challenge and to sometimes even challenge quite senior people.

Adrian

But what they're busy, they welcome in my experience and I do think this is another way as a community generally of us elevating the reputation of the role. Because people start to realize, wow, these BAs are strategic thinkers, they have a place at every part of the conversation, not just at the delivery.

Dave

So, Adrian, if people want to learn more about you or continue this conversation, where could they go?

Adrian

Well, I have a blog, which is AdrianReed.co.uk. It's over 10 years old now. I have hundreds of articles on there. Also, if you look up my company name, which is Blackmetric Business Solutions on YouTube, there's over 100 recorded webinars and presentations and stuff there. And I also have a regular newsletter with links and free stuff. So if you go to BADigest.co.uk, you can sign up for that as well and you'll hear about webinars and stuff through there as well.

Dave

Excellent. We'll have those links in the show notes. And I certainly advise following you on LinkedIn, you share a lot of great information as well as upcoming webinars. So it's a great way of understanding what's coming up and what's going on in the industry.

Adrian

Yeah, thanks. LinkedIn is great, isn't it? It's the way that I think all of us stay in touch these days.

Dave

Adrian, it's always great having you on. I love this topic of business agility and systems thinking. And I think, as you said, it's a great way for BAs to elevate our role and show that we are strategic thinkers and just bring another level to the conversation. So I appreciate you sharing today.

Adrian

Thanks for having me.