



Business Analysis Agility



SOLVE THE REAL PROBLEM, DELIVER REAL VALUE



James Robertson
Suzanne Robertson

Praise for *Business Analysis Agility*

“James and Suzanne have brought their deep and wide experience in business and systems analysis to bear on the importance of good analysis in agile domains. They cut through the hype and tackle the misconceptions that are rife around agile analysis by providing concrete advice and useful tools for anyone undertaking the vital analysis activities in agile development.”

—**Shane Hastie**, Director of Agile Learning Programs – ICAgile;
Lead Editor – Culture & Methods, InfoQ.com

“What is a user story but a requirement? But is it the right requirement? The user said it was, but how does the user know? And how can you discover it?

“Two words: Step back.

“If you step back—and this book shows you how to do that—you can discover the real requirement. Why do you do this? It’s the only way to deliver real value to your customer.

“And what could be more agile than that?”

—**Stephen J. Mellor**, Signatory to the Agile Manifesto

“This new book is a must-have for business analysts looking to bridge the gap between agile and other development approaches. It combines the best of both, into clear and simple guidance, presented in a delightful and light style.”

—**Neil Maiden**, Professor of Digital Creativity, Cass Business School, City, University of London

“*Business Analysis Agility* provides the express on-ramp that business process change projects have sorely needed.”

—**Stephen McMenamin**, Ex CIO & VP of Hawaiian Electric

“The Robertsons share a plethora of tools and techniques that help you infuse agility in your business analysis. The book includes multiple examples and lively scenarios that engage and invite smart problem and solution exploration.”

—**Ellen Gottesdiener**, Agile Product Coach, Founder EBG Consulting

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Are You Solving the Right Problem?

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- *The customer's needs* • *The essence of the problem*
- *Disguised problems* • *The real scope of the problem*
- *How might we solve this problem?* • *Generating solutions*
- *Safe-to-fail probes* • *Choosing the best option*

The problem is usually the problem. In other words, the problem solvers don't have enough understanding of the problem to deliver the right solution. Insufficient information is made available, the problem is incorrectly or badly defined, or the real problem is ignored and instead, an assumed solution is proposed. Naturally enough, it is impossible to deliver the correct solution with any of the above scenarios. Here, we look at how you discover the right problem and ensure that you deliver the correct solution.

“ We fail far more often because we solve the wrong problem, than because we deliver the wrong solution to the right problem. ”

—Russell Ackoff, Professor of Systems Sciences and Management Science, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania

The Problem

The problem normally arises because of some change in the ecosystem. It means something has happened that is beyond the control of your client—a change to the law, technology, customer trends, and so on—that requires a change to one or more of the client's solutions. You can think of the problem as a disruption to existing solutions, and your solution must restore the equilibrium between the solutions and the ecosystem.

However the word *problem* may also mean any combination or variation of the following:

- A desirable business condition to be met
- A significant change to the technology that your customer's solutions use, or could use, that necessitates some product development or redevelopment

- An opportunity or a new idea that your client can take advantage of
- A malfunction that necessitates some development actions

For the sake of simplicity, let's say that *problem* means any of the above. When we talk about “solving the problem,” we also mean taking advantage of the opportunity, or adapting to the change. That it is a problem does not necessarily mean that something is wrong; it's just something for which you will find a solution.

Customer problem.

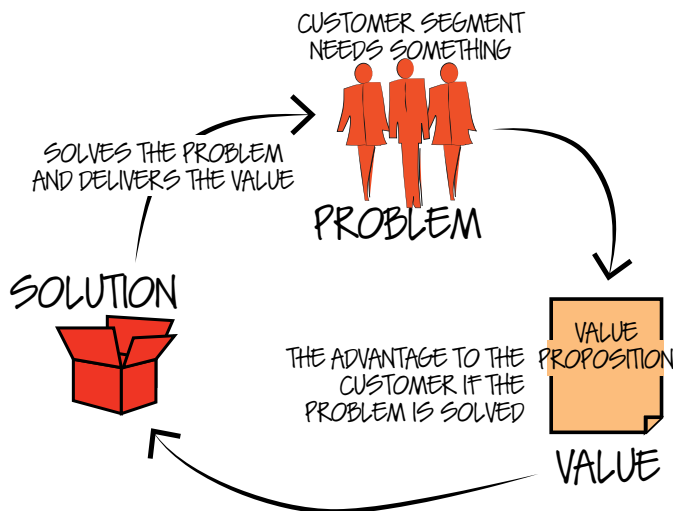
This is a misfit or malfunction that, if solved, provides value to the customer segment. The problem might be a badly functioning business process, a desired change, or an opportunity.

Are You Solving the Right Problem?

Figure 3.1 shows the components that we are dealing with. However, you must always keep in mind that the customer's description of the problem, and the value the customer places on its being solved, might not yet be correct.

Figure 3.1

The situation: the customer segment has a problem, and it puts a value on this problem being solved. Your solution must solve the problem and, by so doing, deliver the value.



We *think* we know what the problem is, but we are keeping an open mind to the possibility of its changing as it becomes clearer.

What can go wrong? Plenty.

- What if you have misidentified the customer segment?
- What if there are subsegments, each of which has a slightly different problem?
- What if the value stated is indeed valuable, but there is something even more valuable?
- What if initially the segment has indicated something is valuable, but there is little or no value to your organization?
- What if there is a mismatch between the problem and the customer segment?
- What if the segment needs something more than the needs already stated?
- What if the need you based your value on is not the most important need?
- What if solving the problem has inadequate benefit for the customer or your organization?
- What if solving this problem will result in a vanity product, when more fundamental needs (to do with the customer's continued wellbeing) are ignored?
- What if solving this problem is contrary to your organization's strategic direction?

"Am I solving the right problem?" is a simple enough question and one that, surprisingly, is not asked nearly enough.

Clearly, we need to spend a little time looking closely at the problem. Solving the wrong problem is of no use to anyone.

It might take a little effort to find the right problem, but consider the alternative. Every year, the results of tens of thousands of software projects, and countless more product and service development efforts, are abandoned because they failed to solve the right problem. It is hard to imagine teams deliberately building something nobody has any use for. We can only conclude that the teams failed to discover the right problem to solve.

We must also ask whether we are heading in the right direction. If your customer's business is losing sales, building a point of sale system is not going to solve the problem. A business intelligence system is not going to help much if you cannot fulfill your customers' orders. Sadly, we see this kind of thing all the time—projects that set out to build solutions that will do little or nothing to alleviate the real problem and do not provide anything of real value.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

As bizarre as it might seem, you might consider Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. In case you need a refresher on Maslow, please look at Figure 3.2, while we describe how his hierarchy of human needs also applies to organizations.

The thing to note about Maslow's hierarchy is that it is necessary for a human to attain one level of need before being able to move up to the next level. For example, you are not concerned about a feeling of belonging to a community if you are being shot at or bombed. Similarly, personal safety is not of great concern if you're starving or without water.

If we apply this hierarchy of needs to organizations, we see that at the bottom level, the organization's need is for some form of revenue (organizational food) if it is to survive. Similarly, an organization cannot expect to achieve respect from peer organizations if its products are not being loved by the market. Nor would producing a well-loved product work if the logistics, product, and distribution are not firmly in place.

Consider the problem that your project intends to solve and ask where in the organizational hierarchy it fits. Keep in mind that you must attain one level before moving upward to the next. Is your project attempting to improve security when you have no (or incomplete) infrastructure or revenue to protect? Is your project intending to produce a vanity product aimed at one of the higher levels when the organization has not yet attained the basic low levels? If so, you're not solving the right problem.

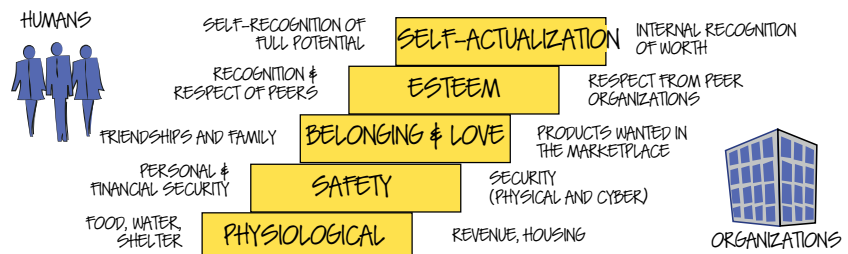
The Outcome of Solving the Problem

There is a need to step back and understand the needed outcome before you start construction. This is not a plea to return to the big upfront specification, but a suggestion that without knowing the required outcome, without understanding the real needs of the customer, your project is likely to flounder. We have seen that building software and testing

Many companies have learned Maslow the hard way.

Figure 3.2

Maslow's hierarchy of human needs and how it applies to organizations.



it on its users can be counterproductive. Much of the time, individual users are not in a position to assess the outcome for their organization as a whole. They can see that the software does something they asked for, but the chances are that they have asked for the wrong thing, or there is a better solution than the one they asked for.

However, if you have correctly understood the customers' needs and know the right problem to solve, you will produce a better solution and do it more efficiently. Until you solve the right problem, your project remains unfinished.

The Customer's Needs

Talking about needs is another way of talking about the customer's problem. But it's worth doing, as sometimes you find different insights by approaching from a different angle.

Needs are subtle and aren't always the first thing to appear. Chris Matts, an agile coach, told us about an experience he had where the need was initially perceived to be for large-print books for older people. After a little digging around, it was discovered that some older people are embarrassed or reluctant to have their eyes examined. While large-print books would help, there is also a need to make it easy and not embarrassing for old people to receive eye examinations and, if needed, treatment or reading aids.

Needs are not the same thing as solutions. For example, you don't need health insurance, but you need to be able to afford the healthcare you need. Whether that need is met by insurance; free or cheap healthcare; becoming incredibly wealthy; or becoming incredibly healthy and reducing the lifetime need for healthcare is irrelevant. The need remains the same—you need to be able to afford whatever care you need.

Obviously, unless we understand the needs of the customer, we are unlikely to build products that they will use.

However, sometimes seeing these needs is difficult. First, we tend to see other people's problems through a filter built around our own existing products and solutions or around what solutions we think we can deliver or indeed want to deliver. So we must step away from our own internal reality, get out of our own way, and embrace the reality of the customer segment whose needs we want to fulfill.

Consider this. Customer segments were probably determined by needs. That is, the segment is made up of people with the same need, and they receive value if you can satisfy that need. So now we can say that the real problem is how might we deliver real value by satisfying the real need.

Talking about needs, not solutions, is a better way of talking about the customer's problem.
