

The Agile Business Analyst: Working Towards Product Ownership

Joy Beatty
Vice President, Seilabs

David Gardner
Senior Product Manager

Candase Hokanson
Senior Product Manager



www.seilevel.com

Introduction

You're a hardworking, successful business analyst (BA), and have just been told your organization is "going agile." Perhaps you've heard a few details about the types of roles involved in an agile development environment, but nothing that really depicts how a BA fits into this new atmosphere. So what does this shift in your organization mean for you?

The good news is business analysis still plays a key role in agile projects—and it deals directly with Product Ownership. The concept of product ownership is the shared and cooperative responsibilities between a product owner (PO), a BA, and others critical to delivering the right product. Business analysis must occur in every project, whether it is done by the PO, BA, or someone else. Since BAs have specialized skills and experience, they are logical candidates to provide requirements management work on agile projects.

Roles and Responsibilities

Product Owner: The product owner represents the needs of the business and has a responsibility to make sure the business value is delivered by the project.

Business Analyst: The business analyst, with specialized skills in requirements analysis and management, and a close working relationship with the agile delivery team, also ensures requirements map back to the business value, and that the entire agile team understands that business value.

The following table provides a breakdown of responsibilities between the BA and PO. In cases of shared responsibility, the team member with the most appropriate skillset typically facilitates the task, while the other provides support.

Responsibilities	Business Analyst	Product Owner
Identifies stakeholders	X	X
Facilitates elicitation sessions	X	
Ensures team understands business value	X	X
Creates visual models	X	
Specifies requirements and acceptance criteria	X	X
Answers team questions		
Reviews acceptance tests	X	
Identifies missing requirements	X	X

How the BA and PO Work Together

Product owners are generally from the business side of an organization, and are ultimately responsible for what is delivered. In the most basic agile approach, a PO has the full responsibility for the product backlog. That is, he/she interacts with the stakeholders, develops and tracks market analysis, and works with the technical team to create, elaborate, and manage items in the product backlog.

A single PO who fully owns the backlog end-to-end may work well in a small organization or on a small project, but this quickly becomes unmanageable under larger circumstances. On large, complex projects, splitting the product ownership obligations works best, with shared goals and responsibilities accomplished by a PO and BA.

The analyst still needs to facilitate interactions with project stakeholders, understand their needs and wants, and apply rigorous analysis to ensure the most important things are prioritized in the backlog. Business analysts in agile development require advanced communication,

The Agile Extension to the BABOK® Guide, Version 1.0, p. 4

INVEST in Good Stories, and SMART Tasks, Bill Wake, August 17, 2003, <http://xp123.com/articles/invest-in-good-stories-and-smart-tasks/>

facilitation and negotiation skills.

Product owners and BAs should collaborate on things like: crafting the definition of “done” with the agile team, eliciting requirements, and loading and grooming the backlog throughout project sprints. Business analysts also often act as proxy for the PO if he/she is unavailable.

This type of cooperation requires a tight working relationship between the PO and BA. Communication must be ongoing. The PO should consider business needs and engagement with stakeholders, while the BA focuses on developing well-formed user stories that are ready for the development team to tackle. Both need to be flexible in responding to changes, and both need to be involved in managing the backlog and elaborating the user stories. Stated another way, “Agile business analysis is about ensuring the right information is available to the development team in the right level of detail, at the right time, so they can build the right product.”

User Stories

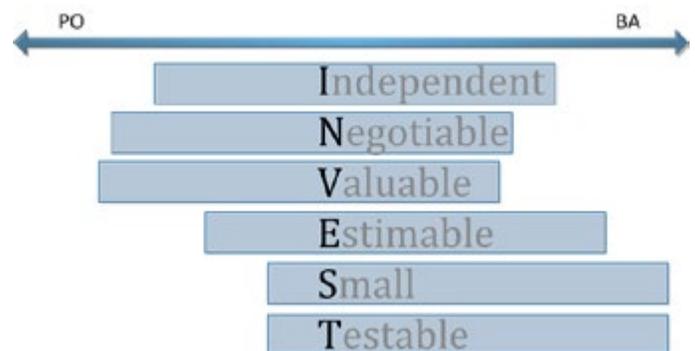
Bill Wake created the INVEST acronym to describe characteristics of a good user story. INVEST stands for:

- Independent: User stories should not overlap in concept, and be able to schedule and implement in any order.
- Negotiable: Instead of an explicit contract for features, a good story captures the essence of the ask, not the details.
- Valuable: Each story needs to be valuable to the customer.
- Estimable: The agile team needs to be able to estimate the work necessary to complete each story. An exact estimate is not required, but enough to rank and schedule. A story that is hard to estimate or has a significant amount of work associated with it probably needs to be broken down further.
- Small: Good stories tend to be small.
- Testable: A good story is testable.

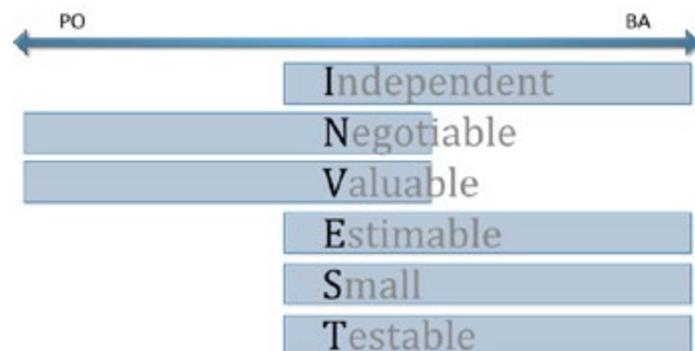
INVEST is a useful way to quickly check to see if a user story needs additional work – keeping in mind that stories higher in the backlog have more detail.

The PO and BA need to work together on determining how requirements for the project are elicited, specified and managed. Using INVEST as an example model for requirements characteristics, the PO and BA could divvy up responsibilities according to their strengths, working relationships, and syncing their collective workflow. The following is an example of a possible arrangement of responsibilities.

In this example, both BA and PO equally own working the Independent characteristic, but Negotiable and Valuable fall more so under the PO’s umbrella (Business), with Estimable, Small, and Testable belonging more to the BA (Technical).



In another variation, the PO might concentrate on having requirements be Valuable and Negotiable, and is depending on the BA to own other aspects of requirements – Independent, Estimable, Small and Testable.



There isn't a pre-set formula to apply for dividing responsibilities – the BA and PO need to learn what works best by doing stories and working with stakeholders. Training, coaching and workshops can enable both to become more proficient, but how the PO and BA form their working relationship will need to be shaped and

reshaped within each new team.

To summarize the product ownership concept:

- A cooperative relationship between BA and PO
- PO is usually from the business side
- BA can be a proxy for the PO on some activities, answering developer questions about story implementation
- Division of activities has to be determined by the PO and BA together, and can be different for each pair and / or project
- BA helps load backlog from requirements elicitation
- PO focuses on getting the stories right
- BA focuses on getting the Acceptance Criteria to be clear and actionable
- Product backlog prioritization is done by both (PO still owns, BA heavily involved)
- PO “signs-off” on stories done in an iteration (doesn’t have to wait for review day)
- BA makes sure PO isn’t surprised

Expected Challenges for a BA in Agile

There are challenges that come along with any change. Some challenges that analysts may face in moving to agile include:

- Dependency on teams who don’t use the same process for documenting requirements or scheduling work
- Product owners who have little time available for working directly with teams, either because of work demands or other factors such as significant time zone differences (e.g., PO in Europe, Scrum team in US and India)
- Product owners unwilling to let BAs assist in requirements work
- Adjusting to the pace of scrum, and just enough requirements details as is needed at a given point in time

- Business analysts adapting to the concept of continuously working requirements throughout the development cycle, constantly adapting to new information and changes along the way
- Working with new scrum or other agile teams— unfamiliar with or freshly trained in scrum principles— and will need to assist the team to pick up the new approach
- Being a champion of the “People over Process” agile principle

Suggestions to Consider for BAs in Agile

Business analysts should play a key role in agile projects - especially large ones - just as they would in waterfall projects. However, the exact nature of the role of the BA will change over time and could change project to project, depending on the agile team and the PO he is working with. In order to be a successful BA on an agile project, you need to work with the PO hand-in-hand to maintain focus on business value throughout the entire project lifecycle, adapt to the agile process of just enough requirements information just in time, and help his organization develop an agile PO/BA “product ownership attitude.”