Elicitation is a critical business analysis activity. It’s one of the most challenging aspects to learn, yet it also leverages a collection of skills that most of us use in a variety of other capacities. As a business analyst, you will always have room to grow in elicitation.

Without elicitation, a BA simply writes down what is asked, or completes a set of models about the requirements. You may know some BAs who do this today and, quite honestly, they are more like note-takers than business analysts. They are not fully bringing to bear their business analysis competencies on their work, and this is fundamentally necessary to be the type of business analyst who proves incredibly valuable to 21st century organizations.

Over and above this, most BAs actually find elicitation to be one of the most fun parts of their jobs. So it’s something to look forward to as you become a business analyst.

Elicitation is absolutely necessary in the context of creating a successful project. If we too quickly move from problem to solution or bypass understanding the problem altogether, we run the risk of creating a very well-analyzed and possibly well-documented solution to the absolutely wrong problem. This means wasting your time as a BA and time from other project participants, and most often in costly development work. And it reflects poorly upon the business analysts. No ifs, ands, or buts.

What is Elicitation?

Elicitation is the process of working with stakeholders to understand what they want to achieve through the project or to understand how the business is organized today. A stakeholder is someone who owns or provides input on a specific aspect of the project or the organization.

Stakeholders might have a very clear picture of what they want and what they do, or they might be vague and ambiguous. Some stakeholders I’ve worked with are very clear on the vision, but very fuzzy.
on the details. Others I worked with can think with absolute clarity about the details and walk you through their entire process from end to end, but completely lose track of the big picture. Elicitation involves bringing out the best ideas from people who see all the different aspects of the problem.

Elicitation also includes documenting the results of what you find. So if you sit down and observe someone do their work and then you create a work-flow document that represents the understanding you achieved through that observation, you just completed some elicitation.

Often our documentation includes some analysis as well. So we begin to identify new requirements or see contradictions as we document the results of elicitation. But in its purest form, documenting the results of elicitation is clearly identifying what you understood through the elicitation process, not necessarily the implications of that understanding. Most often when we are taking meeting notes, this is a form of documenting the raw information from an elicitation exercise.

**ASKING WHY (WITH FINESSE)**

We actually learn the fundamental concept of elicitation when we’re two years old. As two-year olds, we learn to ask, “Why?” The world is a mystery and we have infinite curiosity. Why, Why, Why? We could go on for hours much to the irritation of our parents. We are sponges for new information.

Business analysts can be a lot like what I would consider a mature version of this two-year-old; one who is a little bit more sympathetic to the emotions of the people from whom they ask “Why,” and one who has finessed the question.

Most BAs have a wide collection of sneaky ways to ask “Why.” Because when you think about it, asking “Why” is extremely confrontational. If you come home from work and I’m your spouse and I asked you, “Why are you home at 6:15?” There is an implied negativity in that question of “Why.” There’s an implied assumption that we did something wrong. As we ask “Why” of our stakeholders, they can also feel like we are questioning their authority, questioning their decision making, or questioning their opinions.

I like to turn “Why” around and ask the same question, but in a few different ways. For an example, I would say, “Tell me how you do it today.” In that course of having the stakeholder walk me through how they do it today, I’m looking for the “Why.” I might also ask, “What problems would you most like solved by this project?” Another good one is, “If we resolved all of these issues, what would life be like?” These are examples of “Why” with a bit of finesse.
Active Listening – Your Most Important Elicitation Skills
While it may seem counter-intuitive, one of the most important verbal communication skills that you can develop is your ability to actively listen. Listening involves the act of “hearing” at its most basic level but is really about understanding – understanding truly what the person talking to you is trying to communicate. It also involves asking relevant follow-up questions until you develop a shared understanding with that person about what they are trying to tell you.

One thing you can practice today, whether at work or home, or even doing normal day to day activities like going to the bank, is actively paraphrasing what you hear. If somebody communicates something to you, take a moment and communicate back what you heard. You’ll know right away if you got it right or wrong because they’re going to tell you. It’s also a great tool when you’re in a conversation as a business analyst because actively paraphrasing ensures understanding all along the way and can help clarify misunderstandings before they become much bigger.

Asking Good Questions
Another key ability of a business analyst when it comes to one-on-one discussions is the ability to ask powerful questions, questions that provoke real conversation and where necessary, maybe even a bit of debate. Think about the questions that you ask.

- Do you ask, typically, yes or no questions where somebody can just say “yes” or “no”?
- Or do you ask open-ended questions?

Open-ended questions allow for multiple responses and some of my best questions are the ones that get an answer that had nothing to do with what I thought I was looking for. So I’d ask a question, put an idea out there, and hear back something completely unexpected. As a BA in those sorts of conversations, you really want to be open to that. Even if your question doesn’t elicit the intended response, the fact that the person responded in that way is valuable information.

And Asking “Stupid” Questions
Part of asking questions is sometimes being able to ask the “stupid” question. A teacher will often tell a classroom that any one person’s question is likely to be had by somebody else as well. I’ve found this to be true a lot of times in my career as well. For example, in my first project we were discussing a design issue and everybody seemed to be in agreement about the resolution. I didn’t understand a piece of it and I thought it didn’t quite make sense. But it was my first project. I trusted that the team knew better than me. Three or four weeks later, the issue behind the question that I didn’t ask came up and we ended up having to solve it later – at additional cost.

So many times I’ve seen this assumption proven wrong: that it’s a stupid question and it’s not worth asking. It can be difficult to ask what seem like “stupid” questions because sometimes people will think that they are really stupid questions. Developing a bit of a thick skin and the ability to ask the question and expect a response, as well as putting up with a little bit of negative non-verbal feedback when you start to go down that path are important traits as a business analyst as well.
THE 9 ELICITATION TECHNIQUES

In its simplest form, elicitation is the process of discovering requirements or business needs. It is important to use a very rigorous process to do elicitation because so often our stakeholders do not have a direct view of the problem. We need to gather and discover that information from people and bring it out. We need to bring forth the fundamental needs to be addressed. To do that, we ask “Why?” But we do it with a bit of finesse.

There are several elicitation techniques.

1 - Interview
Often we think about elicitation in terms of a conversation. We think about an interview. It is one of the most common elicitation techniques. Interviews involve asking questions, listening to the answers, and asking follow-up questions. Interviews can be done one-on-one, but they can also be done in a small group setting as long as you’re careful to get all of the perspectives out.

2 - Observation
Observation is another technique that we’ve already mentioned briefly. Observation involves watching someone complete a task or go through their typical work day. This might also be called “job shadowing.” In some forms of observation, the BA will ask no questions and simply document what was observed. Most often, however, the BA will ask questions and ask the person to explain their work as they go along. It’s a much more effective form of the observation as it allows you to assimilate a lot more information much more quickly and confirm your understanding as you go. As you ask follow-up questions, you might understand the full process. You might understand the handoffs. You might understand why they are handing off a piece of information from one person to another or why they’re answering things in a certain way. Follow-up allows you to start to understand the rules at play as well.

Observation and interviews are not the only two techniques. We’re going to go through the rest of the techniques that are also highlighted in the Business Analysis Body of Knowledge®.

3 - Brainstorming
Brainstorming is considered a business analysis technique, and you might think of it as just the spontaneous generation of ideas, often in a larger group of people with a white board or some capture mechanism. Brainstorming can be very fun. It’s a way to think outside the box and to get people thinking about ideas and solutions that might not come to mind in a more formal elicitation session.
4 - Requirements Workshops
Requirements workshops are also an elicitation technique. This is a structured meeting attended by multiple stakeholders. Typically it’s facilitated either by the business analyst or possibly a professional facilitator. Typically in a workshop, the participants will collaborate to work on a specific deliverable at any stage of the BA lifecycle. You might work with a group of stakeholders to develop a model or develop a prototype. At the end of that workshop, you actually have a deliverable or a work product, as opposed to meeting notes capturing an understanding. So it’s a bit more structured and a bit more outcome-oriented.

5 - Surveys and Questionnaires
Survey and questionnaires are used to gather information from many people who answer a specific question. We’re going to use surveys throughout this course, actually, to get your feedback. I look forward to hearing what your feedback is about the course. That’s a form of elicitation.

6 - Focus Groups
Focus groups are often used for customer-facing products. You might get actual or likely customers in a room to share their perspectives on a product idea, a feature, or a marketing campaign. It’s a great way to hear potential user feedback and is especially valuable for products where you don’t have day-to-day access to the actual users. That’s why we see them more for products than for internal systems. You probably wouldn’t conduct a focus group, for example, with your stakeholders in accounting. You might do more of an interview or a brainstorming session.

7 - Document Analysis
Document analysis is another technique. Now we’re talking about something that the business analyst can do independently. Document analysis involves actively reading a document, such as a regulation, a standard, a competitive product review, or customer suggestion logs – any source of information you have about what a customer might want, what a business user might need, or what might be mandated to be changed for your project. You use document analysis to discover rules, discover requirements, and discover potential changes. Often I’ve used document analysis myself as a technique to prepare for some of the other techniques. Before I go into an interview with a stakeholder, I’ll review the latest project documentation that’s available. Or I’ll look at the process documentation they may have sent to me.

8 - Interface Analysis
Interface analysis is closely related to document analysis. This is understanding the technology system itself by exploring its interfaces. Most often, you might do this by actually using an interface. So you might log in and see how to use the system. You might think of this as exploring the system. If you come from a QA background, it’s very similar to exploratory testing when you just start to use the system and see what it does. But it’s exploratory testing with the goal of understanding why that system exists the way it does today.
9 - Prototyping
Finally, there is a technique called prototyping. There is a lot of back and forth in the business analyst community about the role that prototypes play in the requirements process. One of the ways I’ve found prototyping to be very valuable is by creating a potential graphical interface that could be used to solve a problem, and demonstrating that to the business users and getting their feedback.

A lot of times we work with users who don’t really know what they want and have a lot of trouble articulating their true needs and desires, but they’re very clear when they see something that represents what they don’t want. Sometimes just by putting a prototype up, even if it’s the most ridiculous idea in the world, you can start a discussion. Prototypes can be tools to generate conversations. You can combine prototyping with interviews, or with a focus group.

DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES FOR DIFFERENT PROJECTS
Different projects and stakeholder call for different techniques. I’ve never, in any project, used all of these techniques at once. But I’ve used all of them selectively throughout the elicitation process across multiple projects. There are additional techniques as well. As you mature as a business analyst, you’ll start to leverage techniques from other professions.

Think of your sets of techniques like a toolbox and as you become more sophisticated, your toolbox becomes bigger and more complex. And you have more tools that you can pull from to leverage in any given situation.

ELICITATION NOT ANALYSIS
Before we move on to finding your elicitation experiences, I want you to reflect back on these techniques. All of these techniques were designed to help you discover information; discover user needs. During elicitation, it is less important that you fully analyze what you hear or learn than you actually comprehend what you hear, and have the tools in place to remember the most salient points from that discussion. Most often, you’ll do this by typing up meeting notes or creating some sort of a visual representation of what you learned.

As good analyzers, our tendency is to listen and analyze together, especially when we come from IT backgrounds. We naturally start to think about the technical solution to the stakeholder’s problem instead of confirming what we’ve understood with the stakeholder by summarizing what they just told us in our own words. We jump right in and suggest a solution. Successful business analysts learn to listen first and think later. It’s kind of hard, but you do learn over time to turn that analysis part of your mind off a bit and turn the listening part of your mind on in high gear.

Again, think back to that “Why” with finesse. The two-year-old does not stop to think when you tell him “Why” and that’s why they keep asking that question again, again, and again. It gets very irritating.
A BA who has “Why with finesse” will also answer, paraphrase, confirm understanding, and then ask another variation on “Why” to dig a bit deeper. You do this so that you take the time to fully absorb the problem before you start thinking about solutions.

Now, if you start practicing this tomorrow, you might find yourself in a bit of an uncomfortable situation, so I’d like to prepare you for it. Because I do think it would be worthwhile to start practicing listening without analyzing. This is something you can do in all kinds of context.

If you are just listening and absorbing and not analyzing, how do you handle it when somebody asks you a question? They might ask, “How long is this going to take?” Or, “What are we going to do next?” “What does this mean for the project?” Although it will feel very uncomfortable, it’s important to learn to defer these kinds of questions.

One of my favorite quips will go something like this. I’ll close the meeting by saying,

“You’ve given me a lot to think about and I really appreciate your time. First, I’m going to be sure I understood everything you told me by summarizing our conversation in writing. I’ll send you these notes so you can review them and provide any adjustments. I really want to make sure I understood what you said. Then I’ll also figure out what to do with all the information you gave me in the context of this project, and I’ll get back to you by Tuesday with some clear next steps.”

It’s important that the date is within a day, to maybe three, of when your meeting time is. You don’t want to delay the answer too much, but you do want to learn this art of delaying the answer enough to give yourself the time you need to reflect, to absorb what you learned, and to ensure you’re planning the very best next step.

When you learn to master that art and are also able to generate meeting notes that are validated as accurate by your stakeholder, you’ll know that you are fairly far along your path to building solid elicitation skills.

**Finding Your Elicitation Experience: Non-BA Elicitation Examples**

I hope by now you’re starting to see how you may have built elicitation experiences in other contexts. I’m going to provide a few simple examples to help you think even further along that path.
Salesperson engaging a customer
Let’s think of a salesperson who is engaging a potential customer. They are asking questions and listening to the answer. They’re trying to discover what the customer’s pain point is so that they can suggest the right product to serve that need. They can frame the benefits of that product in a way that the potential customer is going to buy in to and hopefully purchase. You can say that a salesperson is using elicitation. They’re interviewing their potential customer. They’re understanding their needs, their wants. They’re listening. A good salesperson will reflect back and summarize what they’ve heard and not just jump right into a product pitch. That’s an example of good elicitation. If you have any background in sales, you might look to those experiences to see what your strengths are in interviewing, specifically.

Manager assigns you a new project
Let’s say your manager just assigned you a new project and they gave you a very high level overview of what they wanted you to do. I had a manager who used to do fly-bys. He’d say something like, “I need you to work on this.” So I would always set a follow-up meeting to ask him a set of questions clarifying what he was trying to achieve and get a clear understanding of what he was really looking for in that project.

You probably have done this as well. Think about any time you’ve asked your manager a follow-up question about what they wanted out of you, or what they expected from you. You were identifying their needs; their pain point. You were identifying the problem that they wanted you to solve through their work. That is a good place to start looking for some elicitation experiences, especially if you’ve worked with a manager who is especially vague or ambiguous with their requests, like I have some experience working with.

It’s also possible that the work that they assigned you could be thought of as project. So when you think about doing something above and beyond, or besides your normal responsibilities, you could think of yourself, potentially, as the business analyst on a project where your manager is the stakeholder.

Studying a Document
Studying a document, such as a regulation or a standard can also be an example. So if you’ve ever received a document and tried to identify what it means for your job, what it means for your department, how you might need to change your process, that’s an example of elicitation and probably a bit of analysis too.

So is studying the documentation of a competitor to do a competitive review or studying the product of a competitor. If you’ve worked on a project and said, “Well, what does this other company do? Can we go to their website and identify what they do or maybe even use their product?” Or, if you’ve ever asked, “What does Google do? What does Amazon do?” These are usually solutions that are put up as perfect products that we want to model after. Anytime you start to dig in to a competitive product and try to understand what that product is doing, you’ve done some sort of elicitation.
I did this once as a BA. We were building a community site and they kept wanting features that were on Facebook. I felt it was one of the most fun jobs I ever had. I got to play around on Facebook. I think I actually joined the whole Mafia Wars trend because I was trying to figure out how points were assigned for Mafia Wars because that’s something they wanted to emulate in their product.

So just think about those as different examples and how you may have done some of those things. It may not have been in the business analysis context, but remember, it’s less important that you did it as a business analyst than you can find that experience and speak to that experience in the context of selling yourself as a business analyst.

**What’s Next?**

Where do we go from here? Hop on over to the next action worksheet to identify your elicitation experiences. Remember, you don’t have to be assigned as the BA to have a concrete example. Think of any time you used any of the techniques in your work. I’m going to ask you a series of questions around each of the techniques that we talked about, as well as some different ways that you can use to evaluate your overall competency in elicitation.

Then head on over to the forums, of course, to share what you learned. If you have any questions about an experience and whether you think it’s elicitation, please post it in the forums. We would love to help you with that as your instructors. If you found any cool experiences in elicitation where you weren’t expecting them, we would love to hear about that too. That kind of information can also help your peers.

Join us over in the forums to share what you learned and what you’re going to do with this new knowledge you have about your experience as a BA.