

Bad-Ass BA – Techniques and Guidelines For Interviewing Candidate BAs

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Published in the February 2009 edition of BA Times – reprinted here in the original form

You have just been told by your manager that you will be interviewing a candidate for a mid-level Business Analyst position on your team. “We can’t hire full-time employees right now, but we can bring on contractors for this project. Make sure they have the skills we need, okay?” is the only direction you receive in the email other than the candidate’s resume.

Among us are few who have been taught how to conduct an interview, and I’m not talking about the “don’t ask these questions, ever!” memo from Human Resources. Just how do we determine whether a candidate, who has dressed properly for the interview, and seems like a nice person, could be a great contributor to our team?

I look for fundamental traits and indicators. Many people will use the term “soft skills” to describe these traits. I *hate* the term “soft skills” because it implies that the difficult skills are the domain-level technical skills, while the problem-solving and human interaction skills are “easy”. In my humble (ha!) opinion/experience, the problem-solving and human interaction skills and fundamental traits are the most difficult attributes to find in a candidate, and the most difficult to teach to an already hired employee.

Candidates are usually interviewed for their knowledge of a business domain, like, Finance applications, or medical service auditing. There are plenty of people who have the subject matter expertise who can interview a professional level candidate to determine if they have the right knowledge. Few people have been trained to interview a Business Analyst candidate for the critical thinking and communication skills that are indicators for success.

Here is my list of questions for a professional level candidate, an intern candidate (no previous professional experience) and a list of traits that I have found most successful BAs to possess. I hope this will be helpful to you for next encounter with a candidate.

General interview guidelines for a BA

These suggestions in no specific order.

- Use the Dilbert cartoon:
http://www.csus.edu/indiv/l/legorretal/160_Spring_2006_05_Dilbert_on_requirements_gathering.jpg
Ask the candidate to explain why it is funny, and ask for an example of how they resolved a difficult requirements elicitation situation.
- Ask the candidate to describe what information goes into a Business Case, and how does that information relate to a Requirements document.
- Ask the candidate to explain the difference between the role of the BA and the role of the PM, and how they have managed when they had to play both roles on a project.
- Ask the candidate how they go about obtaining success criteria for requirements, and for bonus points, how they determine what metrics to associate with those success criteria.

- Ask the candidate to describe their group facilitation skills.
- Ask the candidate to describe the difference between functional and non-functional requirements.
- Ask the candidate to describe the difference between a requirement and specification.
- Ask the candidate to describe the most interesting problem they ever built a model for, and what the model showed.
- Ask the candidate if they are an "ask for forgiveness or wait for permission" type of person, and why.
- Ask the candidate what they enjoy about being a business analyst.

Interview questions for the BA Intern position

People who interview for an intern position are not expected to have previous professional-level experience. Keep in mind that while you, the hiring group, are hoping for high-quality and low-cost labor, the candidate is evaluating you and a potential mentor.

- Do you know what a Business Analyst is, and what a Business Analyst does?
- How does being "in between" the business and technical world sound to you?
- Do you write? Poems? Short stories? Keep a journal or a blog?
- Tell me about a situation where you and some friends were trying to solve a problem. I'm looking for a situation in which some people wanted to go about dealing with the situation one way, and you or someone else had a different idea.
 - planning a team effort for a school project
 - planning a social gathering, party, sports event
- Tell me about a project that you worked on that you enjoyed a lot. Would you give me the big picture first, then tell me about one detail-level part of the project.
- Is there a technical device that you really enjoy using? How would you describe that device, and what it is good for to, say, your great uncle who won't use an automated bank teller?
- How do you feel about asking questions in a group situation?
- When you have been in a group, and people are arguing, how do you feel? Do you try to resolve the conflict? What if you are responsible for the group coming to an agreement?
- Have you used flowcharts or process maps in your school work? How do you decide when to use words to describe something and when to use graphics/pictures?
- In school you found yourself with multiple "priority 1" tasks. How did you decide what to work on? How did you decide how to manage your time and energy?
- Sometimes you have to make decisions in the absence of guidance. Are you more comfortable taking initiative or do you prefer to wait until guidance is available? Tell me about a situation where you had to make that choice.

- How would you describe your leadership style?

Some descriptors to offer an intern are, authoritarian, participative, delegative, coaching. An honest response could be, "I don't consider myself a leader."

Traits of Successful Business Analysts

- Has a strong interest in problem identification and problem resolution
- Able to determine when solutions are being presented as problems, and can drill down to the underlying problem
- Able to comprehend both big picture and detail-level information, and know when to work at which level
- Able to abstract a big-picture from detailed information
- Able to translate between business and technical ways of talking about something
- Able to function with both fuzzy and crisp representations and know when to use which
- Able to ask the dumb questions
- Able to appreciate the need for process even when it will mean possibly missing a deadline
- Able to mediate or temporize when serious conflict arises
- Able to remain collected and productive during conflict
- Able to generate alternative solutions for consideration to facilitate the decision making process, even if the analyst has a strongly preferred solution
- Able to play the role of advocate for a weakly-represented group or alternative that needs more consideration
- A high degree of honesty and integrity
- Able to engender trust and confidence from all the various parties involved
- Maintains a sense of detachment from the influence of power mongers
- Sensitive to politics and power structures
- Tolerant of ambiguous situations
- Respectful of each individual
- Has a warped sense of humor
- Predisposed to work collaboratively while still being able to work independently
- Able to modify own leadership style so that it is appropriate for the project and the parties involved
- Able to take initiative appropriately (do the right thing in the right situation), that is, decide whether to ask permission or to act and then seek forgiveness

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