

Tech hotshots: The rise of the IT business analyst

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Computerworld - The hottest job in IT right now might be the least "T" of them all: business analyst.



Tech purists may shudder -- is it the revenge of the suits? -- but 23% of the IT executive respondents to *Computerworld's* [Forecast 2012 survey](#) said they planned to hire for [business analytics](#) skills in the next 12 months, up from 13% in the previous year's survey.

"IT business analyst" was also rated one of the country's [top 12 jobs to pursue](#) last year by *Money Magazine*, which listed median pay for that position at \$83,100. *Computerworld's* [Salary Survey 2012](#) listed an average total compensation for IT technology/business system analysts at \$84,376, up 1.4% from 2011.

While pure tech is hardly in decline -- database administrators, programmers and Web developers also made the *Money* list -- business analysts are being viewed by more and more IT shops, and the corporation at large, as an essential function. "It's one of the most critical roles in the info tech space," says Allen Hackman, senior director of information technology at [Tyco International's](#) Fire and Security unit.

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The rise of the business analyst mirrors changes in the world of IT, says Hackman, who asserts that the popularity of software as a service,

and the commoditization of technology in general, has made business analysts more important. "You don't need IT to implement Salesforce.com," he notes. "But how do I apply it, how do I meet my business need, how do I get people to use it? That's the role the business analyst fulfills."

IT departments can have good database analysts and developers, Hackman says, but fail without good business analysts on board or at least accessible. "The make-or-break part of a corporate IT department is really the business analyst. It starts with them and ends with them," he says.

Given this, he says, CIOs and other IT managers have to shift their mindset about business analysts. "The old view of the analyst was someone junior, who would take notes and take a detailed order of the business, build a bill of materials for a project to bill out," says Mark P. McDonald, an analyst at Gartner. Now, the business analyst has "been transformed into a senior problem-solver," he says.

What's changed since the days of the junior note-taker? McDonald points to three shifts:

- **Organizations face more complex issues**, with IT expected to help the business side weave together multiple kinds of technology to solve those business challenges.

- **IT is becoming more commoditized and more outsourced**, and as it does so, its main value to the organization becomes analytic rather than procedural. With the easy value from technology already achieved, IT now needs to show the business it can leverage technology for ever more strategic uses, thereby elevating the role of the business analyst.
- **Unlike the rest of IT, business analysts are directly assigned to business units**, even if they still report to IT. Analysts, therefore, are often viewed as the premier source of IT expertise within the organization and are typically expected to have the communications and social skills that go along with that responsibility, McDonald says.

As a result, Hackman agrees, business analysts are enjoying a certain kind of job demand, as well as security -- unusual in IT today. "You can't outsource knowledge and strategy and critical thinking," he says.

Who makes a good business analyst?

Which employees, with what credentials, are best suited to the role of business analyst? [Clorox](#) expects its business analysts to be able to help the business side create project requirements, write test scenarios and plans, manage projects, possess enough technical knowledge to work well with developers and bring business knowledge to IT projects.

Not the typical developer skill set, notes Linda Martino, Clorox's vice president of business engagement and application delivery, who manages 30 business analysts at Clorox.

Martino says that it's more common at Clorox for analysts to come from the business side and learn IT rather than the other way around. Such analysts come with built-in expertise and understanding of the business, she says.

Many of them were "super users," people already comfortable working with technology who became even more interested in IT and wanted to meld their business knowledge with technical skill. "They get to become experts and connect their role to whatever the company is trying to accomplish. So there's a lot of job satisfaction there," Martino observes.

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When it comes to deciding where analysts should fit organizationally, Martino believes it's advisable for companies to put

business analysts in the IT department, even if they spend a good deal of time with their business unit. One reason for doing so is that they may not have much of a career path on the business side; another is job security.

"If you've got an IT person sitting on the business side and your company starts to have to make cutbacks or is looking for efficiencies, a lot of times they'll look up and say, 'Oh, this is an accounting department -- why do I have this IT person here?'"

What analysts want: Variety

That type of job description suits Kermit M. Smith just fine. "If I had to program exclusively, I'd probably go nuts," says Smith, currently senior solutions development analyst at [Carondelet Health Network/Ascension Health](#). "I like having multiple projects and working on them. I need the outside stimulation and the problem-solving."

Over the course of his career, Smith has switched back and forth between IT and business. He earned an MIS degree and worked as a developer, among other jobs, before getting into healthcare IT five years ago. Right now, he's working on an electronic health records project that involves transferring 10 years of data to a new system.

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But the larger part is making sure it's the kind of system that various healthcare workers -- administrators, nurses and billing employees -- will actually use.

To achieve that goal, Smith has spent time figuring out how to tweak the system so it's most usable and most effective. Carondelet's diabetes clinic, for example, has specific needs, and some of its input screens will need to be unique to those needs or else workers in the clinic will likely reject the system.

"Sometimes we want to overcomplicate things, when all they want is five things on a screen and a graph," Smith admits. "A business analyst should be making sure they're getting information to the place of users, and understand what their needs are."

What analysts deliver: Perspective

At [Northwest Exterminating](#) in Marietta, Ga., Director of IT Matthew Metcalfe employs a full-time business analyst, even though his organization is small with just three full-time IT staff and some consultants to support 330 or so employees.

A little less than a year ago, Metcalfe hired Amy Logan from the business side at Northwest Exterminating, where she did sales support, specifically to take software project management off Metcalfe's plate. Logan now works with the business side to develop requirements for projects.

Logan is good at working with business units and identifying the issues they're having with software, Metcalfe says. "She'll come back and say, 'If we can do this and this and this for them, we could have a pretty good system here.'"

She's not an IT person, and yet the people she interacts with know that she works in IT. "They see her as an IT person, sometimes to a fault," says Metcalfe, meaning they'll do things like ask her support questions. That's not her role -- in fact, Metcalfe says he wouldn't want to hire a person from IT to do a business analyst's job.

Not that IT people can't make good business analysts. Gartner's McDonald says he's often seen business analysts come from infrastructure and operational roles within IT, and the benefits to both sides can be myriad.

Effective business analysts bring IT closer to the business, its problems and their resolution. Analysts help IT by adding expertise without adding infrastructure. If their contributions are applied in the proper way, "IT gains ability to deliver value much more quickly and to much greater effect," McDonald says.

Given all those benefits, he says, it's no wonder both sides consider the business analyst to be the most popular job in IT right now.

- **Train them with their business units.** At Clorox, business analysts might attend conferences about gathering and documenting project requirements, but they also attend the same training and conferences that business people in their specialties (manufacturing or human resources, for example) attend, says Linda Martino, vice president of business engagement and application delivery. Likewise, Tyco's business analysts attend both formal training events, like project management classes or PMI certification, and business-specific trade shows and industry events.
- **Keep them talking to one another.** Clorox sponsors "communities of practice" -- grass-roots teams that meet regularly to discuss best practices, templates and tools with people who have similar jobs -- and the business analyst community is one of the most active, Martino says. These meetings explore topics like project post-mortems, discussion of positive and negative project experiences, brainstorming sessions, or note-sharing from conferences or specialized training events.
- **Consider cross-training.** Clorox also has started to cross-train a number of its business analysts so they can work across departments. The company's goal is not only to keep its analysts interested, but also to be more flexible in its ability to meet business needs. "Demand isn't uniform," says Martino. If, for instance, she has three business analysts with expertise in HR, but projects in marketing or supply chains have cropped up, she wants to be able to have the expertise to handle those requirements.

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How should you manage the business analyst in your midst? "The biggest thing is trying to keep them challenged. Their thrill is new projects," says Allen Hackman, senior director of information technology at [Tyco International's](#) Fire and Security unit. "Once a project is implemented, maintaining that isn't as exciting for those people."

Beyond that, CIOs and other tech managers advise:

- **Focus on people skills...** "A database programmer can be very successful staying in his cube and working hard. A [business analyst] who sits in his cube will fail," says Hackman. The business analyst needs to develop strong relationships with users, so they will consult with the business analyst from the start on projects.
- **...but don't forget technology.** Because analysts serve as the bridge between the business side and the technical side, [Northwest Exterminating's](#) director of IT, Matthew Metcalfe, urges his analyst, Amy Logan, to spend time talking about the technical implementation underlying the business process. That helps the analyst create more realistic expectations with business-side clients.