Keeping Track in Issue-Based Consulting

Introduction

Issue-based consulting is an extremely powerful approach to uncovering the real issues that confront our clients. It can also uncover a large number of objects that need to be woven into a compelling story for change. For example, 45 formal interviews conducted during a business alignment and application of information technology engagement at a major railway uncovered about 300 separate issues which, when analyzed, fell into 16 thematic areas.

Some method is necessary to assure that "things don't fall through the cracks" and that as the engagement moves forward the reasoning that leads to findings, conclusions and recommendations is not lost.

I have used Microsoft Access as an aid in keeping track of stuff encountered during engagements.

The development of this technique has been evolutionary beginning with its original use early in 1999 during the Australasian Rail engagement regarding the development of the information technology component of the 1999/2000 Corporate Business Strategy and I have used it through five other engagements. My approach has been to copy the database template from the last engagement on the basis that that template and its accompanying approach are quite likely better than that originally produced early in 1999.

An Example

The example to be used is that from the recent Business Alignment and IT Assessment engagement at GAR.

The Business Issues Table

Issues were identified during the interview process. Most of the interview notes were transcribed and most of the interview notes (transcribed and handwritten) were scanned to pull out detailed business issues. These were recorded in this following table.

Business Issue	Source	Source Type	Business Issue Type
Disconnected set of efforts, they are not in sync	Interviewee 8-10	B	Governance

Table 1 Business Issue Table

The source, in the this case the interviewee interview of August 10, is noted. A source type, "B" for Business and "T" for Technology was specified for I wished to know the aggregation of the business issues in terms of what the business, or user community thought versus the views of the technology organization.

I also felt it important to understand themes across the business issues. This led to the Business Issue Type.

The Business Issue Type Table

All types were defined so that ambiguity might be minimized. Entry of the type became a matter of selecting appropriately from a list box. Sixteen types ultimately emerged from the analysis.

Business Issue Type	Extended Description
Accountability	Accountability is about people being held responsible for outcomes of decisions they make.

Table 2 Business Issue Type Table

In addition, my experience is that clients use many business and firm specific words and phrases. It's important that precision and accuracy become key elements of the consulting process. To this end then I also created a simple definitions table to which we could always refer when in doubt.

Word or Phrase	Definition
Applications	Applications (aka Systems) provide functional support to Business Processes. Applications must support one or more Business Processes. A Business Process may be supported to zero to many Applications. Base information regarding Applications is found in the Application Asset Register table.

Table 3 Definitions Table

In the GAR engagement I was interested in applications, which were also known by some as systems. I created an Application Asset Register Table to keep track of relevant data regarding applications. An example of this table is not provided here, but is available.

The Actions Table

The interview process also identified proposed actions. These were captured in an actions table.

Actions	Source	Owner
In addition to detailing the applications, we are also looking at the data structure and the manner in which data is collected	Interviewee 8/24	

Table 4 Actions Table

The actions table, like several other tables, helps to assure that we don't lose sight of important information gleaned form the client.

The Anecdote Table

Anecdotes are often uncovered which may assist in illustrating various points to be made during the engagement. These were also captured.

Anecdote	Source
I argue with marketing that CA or CB don't run their business based on our demurrage rules so they won't return the cars based on demurrage bills.	Demurrage Billing

Table 5 Anecdote Table

In virtually all cases traceability is maintained. I want to know where a particular datum comes from so that, if necessary, I can go to the source for clarification or better understand the context in which the datum was given.

The Goals Table

The interview process also identified goals. These were captured in a goals table.

Goals	Source
"No Fault" fixing.	Interviewee 8-23

Table 6 Goals Table

The Needs and Wants Table

Stakeholder needs and wants were captured in a needs and wants table. These were treated much the same way as issues in the sense that their could be a large number of needs and wants that were better handled in the context of major themes.

Stakeholder	Need	Want	Major Theme
Cantrell	Locomotive Management System		

Table 7 Needs and Wants Table

The Objectives Table

The interviewees also identified objectives. In this table we also identified, if possible, the strategy relevant to achieving the objective.

Objective	Relevant Strategy	Source
Convince senior management that IT is important		Interviewee 8-11

Table 8 Objectives Table

The Opportunity Table

Opportunities for improvement emerge as one continues through the engagement. These are captured in an opportunity table.

Opportunity	Description	Opportunity Rating	Meta-process Group	Revised Opportunity Group
Assess the IT management processes		Should Do		

Table 9 Opportunity Table

These opportunities are described in way which limits ambiguity, rated as to their importance, associated with a meta-process, and may be grouped at a higher level.

The Parking Lot Table

Oft-times I came across items that seemed important, but didn't conveniently fit within the schema that was emerging, or that I pulled from the schema for one reason or another. I felt it important to not lose track of these. In a sense, nothing was ever thrown away. Hence, the parking lot table.

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Description	Person
GAR has begun a partnership with CC implementing the 6 sigma methodology.	See Interview Notes – Interviewee Drogan's Markup.doc

Table 10 Parking Lot Table

Relationships

One does not, of course, need to use something like Microsoft Access to create the tables described here. Word or Excel would also work. The power in using a database approach is in the development of relationships.

For example, what are the major issue themes? The following graphic emerged from analysis of the issues.

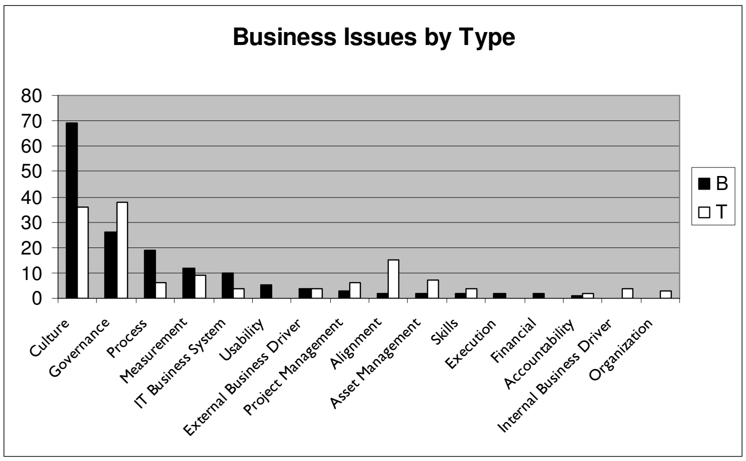

Figure 1 Business Issues by Type

Here we see the business issues by theme and separated by the users' view (B) and the technology view (T).

The database approach also makes it very easy to create and revise deliverables.

In the end, all the dots need to be connected in a coherent and compelling way. My experience has been that deploying a database tool, such as Access, is useful in doing this.

The Meta-Model

While it is possible to develop the tables, their contents and relationships "on-the-fly" it is also helpful to have a meta-model to guide this development. These tables have at their heart a Business Drivers, Business Configuration, and IT Strategy meta-model shown in this next figure.

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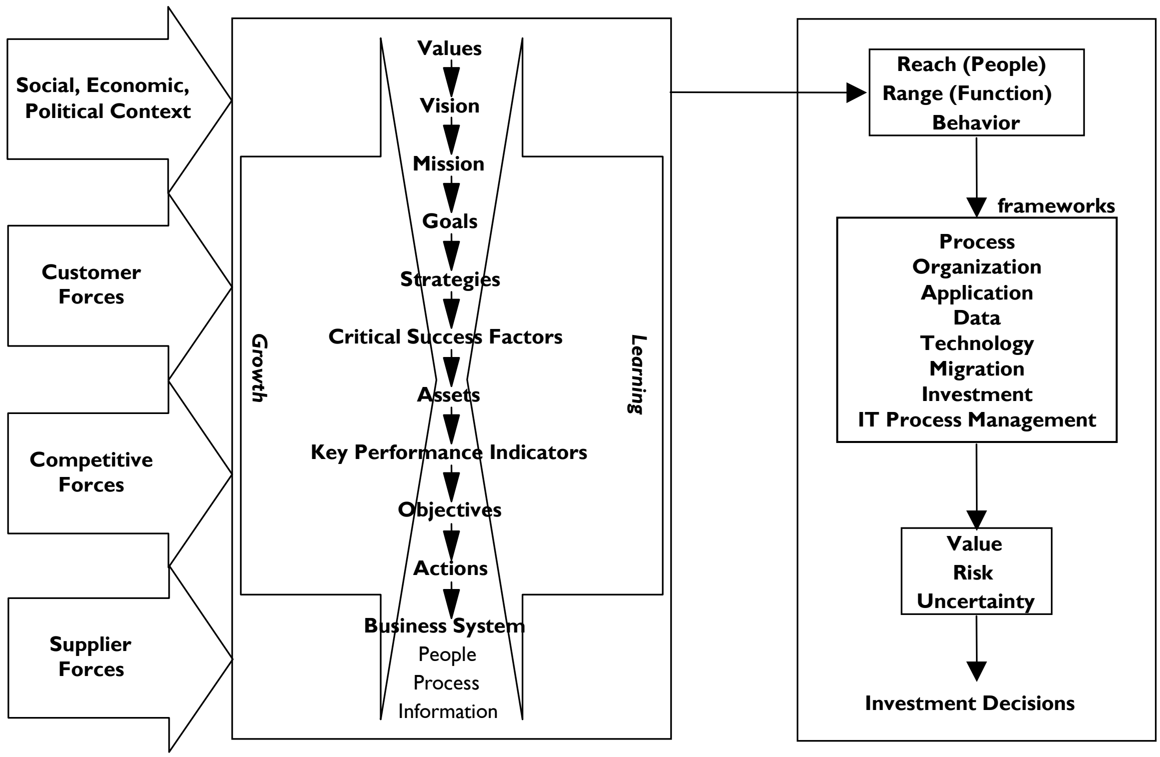

Figure 2 Business Drivers, Business Configuration and IT Investment

Concluding Comments

Using a database as a tool to facilitate the application of issue-based consulting depends on the team adopting a discipline the focuses on the database as "the single source of truth". That means that all must use it, keep it fresh and alive, and respect it as the final arbiter.

Easily said, not so easily done. The enforcement of this discipline rests principally with the Engagement Manager.

However, when the engagement ends, and it becomes important to know how the end was reached, this technique can prove invaluable. And it can help us tidy up those loose ends that always seem to occur.

The final point is that this should not be put in the must-do every time category. It needs to be considered with some judgement. The consultant needs to make sure the means is not mistaken for the end.

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