

10 Reasons Why Documents and Spreadsheets Are Killing Your Career

You probably agree that using documents and spreadsheets for requirements definition and management can be pretty *painful* at times.

But have you considered that these tools might actually be *killing* your career? Especially when you consider the growing number of Business Analysts (BA)s who are using far superior tools now.

Take a look at these 10 reasons why documents and spreadsheets are actually putting your career in peril and leaving you at the back of the pack, as more and more of your fellow BAs embrace the tools that help them work better and faster every day...

Reason 1: Being the document quarterback means your contribution is more clerical than strategic

Documents are dragging you down. The danger of being a Business Analyst is that it's too easy to get consumed, and cursed, by the details. If you work primarily with documents and spreadsheets, you're spending a tremendous amount of time organizing, double-checking, cross-referencing, searching, copying, pasting and typing.

With so much clerical work going on – how much time and energy do you have left for strategic analysis and critical thinking? You're in charge of a critically important document – yet your contribution to that document might be 85% *clerical* and only 15% *strategic*. It's hard to make an impact in an organization when your own strategic input represents only a sliver of the hard work that goes into your Business Requirements Document (BRD).

Reason 2: Your documents travel around in cargo class (a.k.a. 'Email')

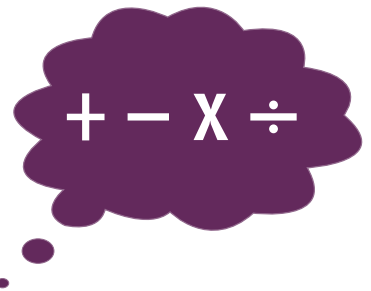
The average number of office emails received each day is 87.

The average office worker spends 41% of each workday just managing email.

This is simply horrible news for the Business Analyst. Those emails that carry your BRD around – the very document that is so essential to your role – competes with 86 other emails in the overstuffed inbox of each reviewer. One day later, there are 173 emails to compete with. With odds like these, you can be certain that your document isn't getting the full, focused attention of your reviewers.

Anything you share via email puts you at a tremendous disadvantage. As each day goes by, your document waits in a queue and, when opened, likely doesn't get the 'brain bandwidth' that you really need in order to raise the quality of the requirements. The result? More work for you, as the number of revisions and the amount of rework goes up.

A growing number of business analysts are using purpose-built software tools for requirements definition and management.



96% of BAs say analysis and critical thinking are very important or critical skills.



The average number of office emails received each day.

Reason 3: Long documents often result in 'blind' approvals

When a reviewer is staring a multi-hundred-page document that has already gone through many changes, what's going on in his or her mind often looks something like this:

"This version MUST be pretty close to what we need..."

"Everyone has looked at this thing a hundred times..."

"If I sign off now, we'll get things moving to the next stage..."

"If anything important is missing, we will certainly catch it in the next phase ..."

It's the *blind approval syndrome*. And so your project progresses onto development, development follows exactly as outlined in the BRD, and all kinds of flaws and errors slowly begin to reveal themselves. Progress slows down to a trickle and a massive rework effort kicks off in order to repair all the mistakes in the BRD.

Unfortunately – and quite unfairly for the BA – others may assume that you and your mistake-riddled BRD is what caused, or at least contributed to the expensive project slowdown and rework.

Reason 4: Writing documents soaks up time and slows down progress

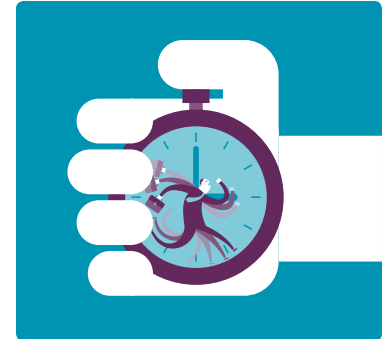
As small pieces, or entire sections, of your BRD get completed, *technically* each one is ready to share. However, everything tends to sit inside the document until the final piece falls into place and the document is polished to the BA's satisfaction.

So reviewers see nothing until one day when the entire *Version 1* arrives with a thud in their inbox. Any potential time savings for feedback and review are squandered, making it more likely for feedback and change requests to extend *throughout* the entire requirements lifecycle.

Reason 5: Documents make you the bottleneck on every project

Inviting others to make edits to a document creates a tremendous amount of new 'open loops'. Every time a reviewer enters a comment, question or suggestion that isn't 100% conclusive in nature, *your* To Do list gets bigger. It falls on you to keep track of every newly opened loop and bring every single one to completion. And you know the drill that follows... a whole lot of chasing people down, brokering conversations between stakeholders, sending more emails, and writing more revisions.

The sad irony here is that *you* become the bottleneck to your own requirements project! It's no wonder most Business Analysts recognize the need to increase quality, make process improvements and reduce rework as problem areas in their role that are most in need of solution.



53% of BAs say the majority of requirements feedback occurs in the later stages (development and testing) of the development lifecycle.



57% of BAs say requirements change based on feedback from various stakeholders throughout the requirements lifecycle.

BAs cite 'increasing quality, process improvement and reducing rework' as the most important driver in adopting a requirements definition solution.

Reason 6: 'Track Changes' kills any hope of real collaboration

Using a document's 'Track Changes' feature only encourages your reviewers to enter feedback while sitting alone, in silence, in front of their computers.

When this happens, there are no *conversations* happening. No sharing of ideas, no opportunity to clarify something, or to ask a question, or to give a helpful answer. Instead you have individuals squeezing more and more words into a document that gets messier and harder to read with every added sentence.

And... you guessed it, *you're* the one who gets the nightmarish task of sorting, comparing, and keeping track of all the commentary. What's more, old edits and commentary typically get discarded with each new revision, leaving no easily auditable trail that shows who changed what and when.

Reason 7: Documents force everyone to 'translate' ideas into text

The fundamental problem with writing a requirements document is *writing* the requirements document.

People mentally conceive ideas using imagery and pictures, yet a long and detailed document like a BRD forces everyone to translate their colorful visions into flat, dull text. As others read that text and translate it into their own mental pictures, misunderstandings are inevitable. When reviewers express their confusion, the knee jerk reaction of the BA is often to *write more text* in an attempt to add clarity to the words on the page. But the opposite result is achieved... as the page count of your BRD goes up, the clarity and readability of all the ideas inside it actually goes *down*.

In contrast, many Business Analysts recognize visual modeling as a superior way to communicate ideas purely and clearly. Most BAs, however, are so consumed by the gargantuan task of writing and clarifying the text content in the BRD that the time for thorough visual modeling just isn't available.

Reason 8: Using spreadsheets to manage dependencies puts all the risk on *your* shoulders

Dependencies are integral to requirements. You can't truly understand a set of requirements unless you know all the dependencies between them. Maintaining these dependencies in a spreadsheet that is totally separate from the document means they're hidden from all consumers of the document as they go through the BRD.

This not only handicaps your readers, but also makes your analysis tasks more difficult and your maintenance tasks harder.

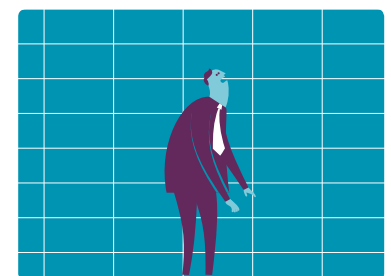
The net result—maintaining a separate spreadsheet makes a highly critical process highly error-prone, and puts all the risk of errors and omissions squarely on the shoulders of the keeper of the spreadsheet... *you*.



84% of BAs value collaboration as a very important or critical part of their role.



58% of BAs view modeling as a critical or very important part of the requirements process.



54% of BAs are using spreadsheets to manage traceability on their projects.

Reason 9: Most of the work that goes into your BRD ends up lost

When the dust settles at the end of the requirements phase, you're usually left with no accessible 'history' of how your BRD came to be. All those emails, meetings and important conversations where people explained ideas, answered questions, and made key decisions are gone. Then the change requests come, perhaps new people enter the discussion and before long the rationale behind key decisions gets clouded or forgotten. Some of the same old issues get debated all over again. Often, new errors work their way into the requirements.

This is torturous for the BA. Things are going off track, but no one has a way to access past conversations and decisions from the requirements phase.

Reason 10: You simply can't get much better or faster at your job when your tools hold you back

The vast majority of Business Analysts (88% according to our most recent survey) still use documents and spreadsheets to some degree to perform their job. For these BAs, no matter how much more knowledgeable and capable they become, the actual impact they can make inside their organizations is diminished to the degree that they rely on highly *manual* documents and spreadsheets as their primary office tool.

However, not every BA is willing to let their career path be held back by antiquated tools. 37% of Business Analysts now use some kind of *purpose-built* requirements tool to improve the way they do their job. Many of them still produce a BRD, the difference is, they've embraced the software tools that let them do so with a single mouse-click.

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Blueprint (<http://www.blueprintsys.com>) is the world leader in collaborative Requirements Definition and Management (RDM) solutions. Blueprint makes life easier for Business Analysts by automating the tedious, time-consuming elements of every requirements initiative—and transforming the business-IT relationship into a visual, engaging collaboration. The result? More predictable budgets and schedules, faster-time-to-market, and far less rework along the way.

Sources:

The Radicati Group Email Statistics Report, April 2010
Forrester/IIBA September 2010 Global Business Analyst Online Survey
Blueprint Software Systems Business Analyst Online Surveys 2008-2010



95% of BAs use capabilities other than Track Changes (instead of or in addition to) to communicate and record feedback, discussion, and rationale for decisions made.

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