White paper

Starting-points and pre-conditions of BiSL implementation

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Introduction

Many organizations are currently busy (re-)configuring the demand side of information provision. BiSL is a usable framework for this purpose. However, questions about how to implement BiSL often arise. In this article, we look at the implementation of the BiSL body of ideas in an organization, focusing on the starting-points and pre-conditions for applying BiSL.

Starting point

The book, 'BiSL, A Framework for Business Information Management and Information Management' (Van der Pols, Donatz and Van Outvorst, 2005), indicates that no unequivocal, pre-defined way exists for implementing BiSL. BiSL is more of a cornerstone for working in a focused way towards improvement, rather than a universal implementation model. This has been our starting point for working towards converting the (theoretical) business information management processes into smoothly running practice.

In practice, we can see various reasons for using BiSL. For example, it is seen as a possible way of introducing efficiency into the demand organization, or as preparation for an outsourcing path. However, other reasons include problems with the quality of the current provision of information or the desire for a shared method within the field of Information Management. Each of these reasons has its own dynamics, problems, and approach.

In this article, the term "business information management" is used in the same way as in the BiSL book: the field of management, control and commissioning for the provision of information on behalf of the customer (business process manager), composed of both the traditional "operational business information management" and information management.

Starting-points and pre-conditions

Depending on the situation, various starting-points and pre-conditions are important for the operationalization of BiSL, in order to achieve smoothly running business information management. In this paragraph, a number of important starting-points and pre-conditions will be discussed in random order, which play a role in our practice.

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1. Do not position business information management as supplier

Business information management is responsible for information provision within the organization. This provision of information serves to support the (business) processes within this organization. Ultimate responsibility for the configuration and implementation of the business process lies with the process owner. A close and direct relationship should exist between business information management and the process owner, with an adequate level of mutual alignment. Business information management is the contact for the process owner when it comes to subjects in the field of the provision of information.

From this perspective, business information management should not be an explicit customer-supplier relationship with the process owner. Should a customer-supplier relationship exist, from the perspective of the process owner business information management is then a suppler operating outside the organization. In that case, the process owner must organize a purchase function with respect to this supplier. In this case, explicit arrangements must be made concerning the services and the quality that business information management will deliver. In fact, this new purchase function will then take on the role of business information management and business information management then becomes an extension of the IT supplier without added value.

2. Uniformity in business processes as condition for efficiency

Business information management in various organizations or business units are regularly combined. This merged business information management supports several business processes. It is assumed that this achieves efficiency advantages. The idea behind this is that similar business information management activities can be bundled and these can be implemented using fewer people.

This argument does not always hold water. Domain and process knowledge is very important for adequate business information management. In order to achieve genuine efficiency, uniformity is necessary in the business processes to be supported. After all, if the business processes are designed very differently and operate differently (even if they are by nature similar business processes), then knowledge of many different business processes within business information management must still be accumulated and maintained. This is difficult to combine with efficiency advantages.

In addition, during a merger, the risk arises of placing business information management remote from the business process, in which case knowledge of actual business implementation disappears within the merged and remote business information management. As a result, management tasks can no longer be correctly implemented. In order to compensate for this, extra points of alignment must again be configured.

Of course, it is possible to continue to achieve benefits in quality and continuity after the merger, as a result of the increase in scale. To some extent, the business information processes can be uniformly configured and implemented. This makes it easier to take over business information management work from one another. Also, during a merger, many possibilities exist for placing the focus on professionalization and the quality of business information management.

3. Good connection between projects and business information management

New development, innovation, and major changes are often implemented in projects. Special decision-making circuits often exists for the decision-making concerning these projects, within

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which the focus is entirely on change and renewal. Relationships with the existing state (technology, use, quality) of the provision of information and with existing and future management are all too often not taken into consideration. However, an explicit connection must exist between projects and business information management.

If a good connection between projects and management is missing, then business information management runs the risk of coming at the bottom of the list for projects. The risk then is that the organization will face unacceptably high management costs (following a project completed within budget), major risks for the continuity of process implementation, etc. This can possibly also lead to distorted working relationships between projects and business information management. The risk of this again is that inadequate cooperation and – more importantly – exchange of information take place.

4. Business information management tasks in the line

There will always be business information management tasks that are implemented by the line. For example, this could be first-line end user support on the work floor by the super user or key user, or monitoring of the data quality. Depending on the size of the organization and the provision of information, the importance of the provision of information for the organization and the extent to which specialist business process knowledge is needed, more or fewer business information tasks will be implemented not within the business information organization, but in the line.

These business information management tasks that are implemented in the line and therefore de-centrally or in a deconcentrated way, should be governed, coordinated, and aligned centrally from within the "dedicated" business information management organization. After all, noises from the work floor, frequently-asked questions, and problems do have to be addressed at the correct level. People who perform business information management tasks in the line often have insufficient time, resources or knowledge for this. An important responsibility for the "central", "dedicated" business information management organization is to organize contacts with business information management in the line and to convert signals from the organization into required actions.

5. Business information management follows knowledge of the business processes

Knowledge of the user organization and the business processes is crucial in order to be able to conduct business information management. This means that nailing down and implementing business information management in principle will always take place where domain knowledge of the business process is concentrated. Business information management thus follows the lines of knowledge of the business processes.

If this principle is ignored and business information management is defined in another way, special steering measures will be necessary in order to ensure that knowledge of the business process and the user organization is still adequately guaranteed within business information management. This control and the resulting actions in general involve additional work and all the associated risks.

6. Business information management follows the power of the business

Decision-making about the provision of information will have to fit in with the way in which overall decision-making takes place within the organization. Business information management thus follows the lines of power of the business. The definition of business information management will have to fit in with the lines of decision-making within the business organization.

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If this principle is ignored, powerless decision-making about the provision of information will result. As a result, no adequate control or direction of the provision of information is possible. The provision of information then becomes a separate subject for specialists, and is not a subject of importance for the business management.

7. Good control of end user support

Business information management is concerned with the provision of information for the organization. This responsibility requires a proactive interpretation of business information management. Specifically in the field of end user support, a proactive interpretation of business information management is very important indeed. This type of proactive interpretation of end user support (as a component of business information management) must be well controlled.

In practice, it is evident that, for employees who implement business information management, the proactive attitude represents an additional challenge to their work. Control of proactive end user support is made more difficult if business information management tasks are placed farther away from the actual business processes.

8. Guaranteeing alignment between business information management and process owners

In many organizations, business information management is associated exclusively with (and interpreted at) operational level. In such cases, the risk exists that business information management is insufficiently linked to the decision-making process concerning process configuration and the provision of information. The "vertical" alignment is missing.

In these situations, it is important to organize a structural alignment between process owner and (operational) business information management. Experiences with the actual use of the provision of information and the course of the process can then be communicated from business information management to the process owner. The latter can then give more consideration to and anticipate the problems in everyday practice when he makes decisions.

9. Clear and structural alignment among the various levels

It is important to organize clear and structural alignment among operational, management, and guidance levels of business information management. This is also recognized as an important aspect within the BiSL mindset.

For the operational activities, it is crucial also to receive direction and frameworks for the activities. On the one hand, to prevent decisions in daily management suddenly having unforeseen and undesirable consequences for the provision of information in the longer term. On the other hand, to guarantee that all contacts with parties involved in the provision of information (IT supplier, user organization, process owners, etc.) take place according to expectations and the agreed patterns.

In addition, it is crucial for decision-making to have some insight into the current state of affairs in order to ensure that the policy pursued can be fulfilled without obstacles posed by the present situation.

This starting-point may seem like an open door; but in practice only very few organizations seem able to deal in an effective way with this starting-point.

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Closing

In this article, we have listed several starting-points and pre-conditions that we often encounter in practice when we are involved in the (re-)configuration or (further) professionalization of business information management. Of course, these are not the only relevant starting-points and pre-conditions that play a role. We would be happy to hear from readers about (further) matters that have affected them.

This article is our first in a (long or short) series of articles in which we deal with the (re-)configuration of business information management using BiSL. In subsequent articles, we will certainly cover comments and additions to this initial article and we will devote attention to how we can interpret the aforementioned starting-points and pre-conditions, in combination with practical examples.

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