

PO or BA? When do you need both?

Two different professions, two different perspectives — and what happens when one of them is missing.

A summary based on my hybrid PO and BA experience, for those who also need to think in both directions and deliver quality work.

BEFORE YOU START

Introduction

If you ask ten different companies what the difference is between a Product Owner and a Business Analyst, you will get ten different answers. In some places, the same person fills both roles. Elsewhere, the two are blurred together — and the result is usually the same: something important drops out of the process.

This document is not a theoretical essay; it is based on my own experience working in both roles. I know what one role sees and the other does not. The distinction matters not because one role is more important than the other — but because **they require a different mindset, focus and perspective.**

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01 ROLE What is a Product Owner?

OFFICIAL DEFINITION — SCRUM GUIDE, 2020

"The Product Owner is accountable for maximizing the value of the product resulting from the work of the Scrum Team. The Product Owner is also accountable for effective Product Backlog management, which includes: Developing and explicitly communicating the Product Goal; Creating and clearly communicating Product Backlog items; Ordering Product Backlog items; and ensuring that the Product Backlog is transparent, visible and understood."

Source: Scrum Guide 2020 — Ken Schwaber & Jeff Sutherland (scrumguides.org)

In short, the PO is accountable for ensuring that the team's work results in the highest possible product value. They manage the backlog — what goes into it, in what order, and whether everyone understands why.

The PO's focus is depth: their product, their responsibility, their decision.

In practice

The Product Owner is the deepest expert on their own product. They work with it every day, understand its functions, the underlying logic, user needs — and what each change affects in the system.

When a new project arrives, the Product Owner joins the kickoff meeting and reviews the project's business requirement document (PRD or BRS). Once the document is finalized, they process the parts affecting their product and create user stories for the team. They organize the backlog and communicate progress to the project.

What the PO does — and does not do

✓ PO responsibility

Backlog prioritization · Writing user stories · Sprint planning · Roadmap · Accepting developments · Representing users

X Not a PO responsibility

Describing E2E processes · Aligning multiple systems · Gap analysis · Creating a business case

02 ROLE What is a Business Analyst?

OFFICIAL DEFINITION — IIBA BABOK® GUIDE V3

"Business analysis is the practice of enabling change in an organizational context, by defining needs and recommending solutions that deliver value to stakeholders. Business analysts work across all levels of an organization and may be involved in everything from defining strategy, to creating the enterprise architecture, to taking a leadership role by defining the goals and requirements for programs and projects."

Source: IIBA BABOK® Guide v3 — International Institute of Business Analysis (iiba.org)

In short, the BA identifies what is needed and recommends how it can be delivered in a way that creates real value for stakeholders. They are the link between business and technology.

The BA's focus is breadth: the full journey, all related systems, the entire flow.

In practice

The Business Analyst understands systems and processes at a broad level — not in the depth of a single product, but along the full flow. They see which steps follow each other, understand the individual products at a high level, and see where they connect, what triggers them and what the final outcome will be.

When a project arrives, the BA writes the business requirements for all affected areas, discusses them with the vendor, tracks progress and communicates with the project.

What the BA does — and does not do

✓ BA responsibility

E2E process description · Gap analysis · Data flow across multiple systems · Business case · Project communication

✗ Not a BA responsibility

Backlog prioritization · Sprint planning · Deep product knowledge · Day-to-day management of the development team

03 IDEAL COLLABORATION

How do they ideally work together?

The best results happen when the PO and BA do not work in parallel, but build on each other. Each brings their own perspective while relying on the other's. The two roles complement each other: what one sees, the other may not — and vice versa.

The ideal flow

① A requirement arrives from the business area or the client

The BA is the first to explore it — checking how it affects the full process, what comes before and after, and which other systems are involved.

② BA and PO discuss it together

When the requirement reaches the application level, the BA sits down with the PO. The BA explains the requirement and the relevant big-picture context. The PO — who deeply understands their own application — can break it down into smaller pieces. Together they discuss what is logical, feasible, aligned with the existing user flow, and technically possible within the given timeframe.

③ Everyone continues working in their own area

The BA describes the requirement in detail in the main project documentation (PRD or BRS). The PO writes user stories for the development team — also reviewing them with the BA so that they are understandable and feasible for the team.

④ The PO organizes and communicates

The PO organizes the backlog according to the requirement and the project schedule, and continuously informs the project where things stand and when delivery can be expected.

The two roles are like two different lenses on the same reality. **Neither sees the full picture alone**— but together, they do.

04 COMPROMISE

When one person does both

In reality, this is not uncommon. In smaller organizations, when resources are limited, or during transition periods, the same person may fill both the PO and BA roles. This is not wrong in itself — but it is important to recognize the risks.

⚠️**The most important realization:** do not assume that what we know is the whole picture. This is where many mistakes are born — not from ignorance, but from not knowing what we do not know.

PO in a BA role

A PO may tend to approach business requirements from the perspective of their own product, and may not choose the optimal solution. They may not fully see where data travels in the system, what it triggers, or how other systems respond.

What can you do? Actively reach out to business areas and IT experts. They can explain how the flow works end to end, where the data travels, and which other systems are involved.

BA in a PO role

A BA who does not know the application deeply enough may include requirements that are technically infeasible, do not fit the established user flow, or propose an unnecessarily complex solution.

What can you do? Use the application a lot and explore every branch. Talk to testers and IT specialists — they understand the underlying logic.

This is not about being unprepared — it is about perspective. **Two different professions, two different perspectives.** If one person does fill both roles, conscious compensation — actively consulting with those who see what you do not — can significantly reduce the risks.

05

MISSING ROLE

When one of them is missing

It is not uncommon for organizations to simply leave out the PO or BA role, or not request this type of resource for a project. Their absence causes different types of problems — but in both cases, delivery quality suffers.

If the BA is missing

If the PO also performs BA tasks, the process can easily become fragmented. By nature, the PO focuses on their own product — and may not properly explore every affected area and system.

During requirements elaboration, unanswered questions can easily remain — not because someone is unprepared, but because the perspective that sees the full flow is missing.

Dead ends during development, late alignment rounds, and problems that could have been discovered earlier — if someone had asked the right questions in time.

If the PO is missing

This may be less visible, but in the long run it is even more painful. Without a dedicated PO, requirements arrive at the development team without filtering — everyone asks for what they want, without someone asking: is this really needed? Is it feasible? Does it fit what users are used to?

No one sees the product as a whole. No one represents the user. No one says when something is illogical, uneconomical, or simply unnecessary.

The backlog becomes an unprioritized wish list, and the development team tries to move forward between constantly changing directions.

In both cases, the lesson is the same: **the perspective of the missing role must be compensated for somehow**— through active alignment, involved experts or deliberate processes.

REAL EXAMPLES



Case studies

Case 1 — BA present, PO missing

HOW IT WORKED

Requirements were defined by the business areas — they also decided what should go into the application, how it should look and how the process should move forward. User behavior had not been researched. The product was a packaged solution, so the UX was largely given, but no one examined whether it was truly ideal for users. The application requirements were written by three BAs who were professionally strong and did good work — but the application had no single owner to structure the backlog, delivery and development iterations.

What happened: Too many requirements were packed into the application. The display and user flow were inconsistent because each requirement arrived in its own way, and there was no one to filter and structure them according to a consistent product logic. The BAs tried to serve every business expectation, but without a PO there was no one to say no, prioritize, or ask: does this truly serve the user?

Case 2 — PO present, BA missing

HOW IT WORKED

Senior POs described the requirements by function. For each function, they described the user flow, the data to be displayed and the actions available on the interface. The product was a packaged solution, so the UX was relatively fixed, but the full user process had not been researched. The requirements were logical on their own — but each covered a single function, not the full process. The organization's BA team was involved for review, and that is when it became clear that the documentation was insufficient, so BA resources had to be requested retroactively for the whole project.

What happened: The descriptions proved too superficial for development — and this became clear exactly when delivery should already have started. They did not include all affected systems, and the full process could not be traced from them. Gaps surfaced that could have been identified during planning with early BA involvement. The result: delays, late alignment rounds and partial redesign.



CLOSING NOTE

The key point in one sentence

PO and BA are two different professions and two different perspectives — and the best development processes happen when both are present and complement each other.

Product Owner

Deeply understands their own product. Represents the user and the product vision. Prioritizes, decides and structures. Main partner: the development team.

Business Analyst

Sees the full process. Connects business and technology. Describes the big picture. Main partner: the project and business areas.

If one person does both

Possible, but risky. The key is: do not assume you see everything. Compensate through active alignment for the perspective that is not yours.

When one of them is missing

The missing role's perspective must be compensated for somehow — otherwise either the product or the process will suffer.