

Misconceptions, misunderstandings and questions about ASL[®] and BiSL[®]

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Machteld Meijer and René Sieders, specialists in the field of application management and business information management, were closely involved in the development of ASL and BiSL. However, whilst working with and using both models they encountered several misconceptions and misunderstandings. This paper scrutinises these and also answers some frequently asked questions.

Since their introduction, much interest has been shown for both the ASL and BiSL frameworks and the number of followers is still increasing. The ASL BiSL Foundation, owner of the frameworks, enjoys a large number of partners and the number of articles and presentations on practical applications is still increasing. Yet, in practice, various misunderstandings and misconceptions exist about both frameworks. This prompted us to examine a number of misconceptions and misunderstandings. We also give some insight into the general structure of the frameworks: why do ASL and BiSL look the way they do?

Question: What are the names of the IT management domains in ASL and BiSL?

In the new versions of ASL and BiSL the names of the three IT management domains are:

- business information management (BIM) (demand);
- application management (supply: application services and products);
- IT infrastructure management (supply: infrastructure services and products).

The Dutch terms for these domains now very much resemble the English terms. Formerly the term 'functional management' was used for business information management and the term 'technical management' was used for IT infrastructure management. These terms were often used for operational activities only, however the frameworks include tactical and strategic activities as well. In order to avoid any confusion the new terms are used when the entire domain is meant.

Misconception: ASL and BiSL are alternatives to ITIL[®].

ITIL was developed in the 1980's. It was a process framework based on best practice, in particular coming from the IT infrastructure domain. In the mid-nineties the need for an alternative to ITIL specifically for application management (including application maintenance and renewal) was increasing, because ITIL was paying little attention to the specific needs of that domain. Therefore ASL was developed, partly based on the ITIL process descriptions. A logical next step was to develop a process model for the third domain, business information management (operational functional management and information management) as well: BiSL. This framework fits well with the framework for application management, ASL, and thereby indirectly with ITIL as well.

Since its inception, the focus and scope of ITIL have been widened and new processes have been added. However ITIL is still written for the IT service provider, although its starting point now is much more the needs of the customers. ASL has also been adjusted. Process names have been changed and the changes also include more attention to multi-vendor services.

A question that is regularly asked is: are ITIL, ASL and BiSL interchangeable? The answer is: partly. For a number of relevant activities such as handling incidents and managing change requests they are, on a high level. However, BiSL is written for the demand side of IT and not for the IT provider (as ITIL and ASL are) and hence describes the duties and responsibilities of the demand organization. Therefore it differs from ITIL and ASL in the apparently corresponding processes and it contains a large number of activities and processes that are not included in ITIL. Hence, it has much added value for the customers of information services, compared with ITIL and ASL.

Although ASL and ITIL are both situated on the supply side, here we see differences as well. An important difference in the classification of processes is that ITIL does not cover the processes by which products that are included in the services are created and modified. In ASL these processes are as important as the management processes. Moreover, ASL is more easily understood by the application manager and developer. For the corresponding processes (particularly the 'old' service support and service delivery processes) ITIL provides more details than ASL does.

In addition we see in ASL and BiSL that the strategic level is covered better: they include processes whose "counterparts" are missing in ITIL.

This leads to the observation that each framework has its own strengths and its own target group. On the other hand, there are organizations that have not separated the infrastructure, application and functional management activities very clearly: they have been brought together in one organizational unit, or even in the same employee. How can you deal with this in practice? Our advice is: if you have implemented the relevant processes based on ITIL and everything runs according to expectations, then let it be so. However, if you have a need for improvements or deepening, or if you still wish to organize or reorganize your processes on the basis of a framework, then rather use the management framework specific for your type of organization - it is made for it. Moreover, the exchange of best practices with other organizations is easier because these practices are mostly focused on one domain and one process model.

Misconception: Having three management frameworks, ITIL, ASL and BiSL, is inconvenient; one management framework would be better.

Each management domain has its own responsibilities. There are many interfaces between the processes of the parties involved in implementing an information need, however each party also has its own internal processes. Managing and maintaining applications is a fundamentally different profession than managing and operating the technical infrastructure. Therefore different processes and a different interpretation of corresponding processes are required. Both are substantially different from managing the information provisioning on behalf of the user organization. Therefore, it is logical that there are separate management frameworks. Would you like to work with only one process framework in the chain 'grain suppliers, flour mill, bakery, shop, breakfast service'? Probably not. Defining the interfaces between the processes is very important, however.

In a world where business and IT get increasingly intertwined, integral management is the key word. However, IT management is too dynamic, versatile and complex to simply lump it together, i.e. to integrally implement all processes across all divisions. Therefore, we strongly support the CNIP principle:

Co-operation when Necessary, Independent operation when Possible. By separating the different forms of management, closely aligning the relevant processes between the management domains and applying the most appropriate framework one gets a highly flexible and controllable service provision. I do not have to know how the process is within the workshop of my garage, but I do have to make arrangements on the interface: when should I bring the car, when should I pick it up, what do I expect, what should I pay, etc.

Misconception: ASL and BiSL appear to indicate that processes are more important than results. Moreover, you might expect that the management frameworks describe how a process should be set up and carried out.

ASL and BiSL (and ITIL as well) are management frameworks that describe the processes you can identify and should carry out in the field of information technology (IT) and information provisioning (IP). It is with good reason that in the process descriptions much attention is given to the description of the expected results. Basically, a good process cannot yield unwanted products. If it does, the principles, agreements and control are not well set out. Yet often this happens. A process that does not result in a good product has no value, however when producing a product it is often quite useful to define (and describe) and set up a process, although this is not necessarily a prerequisite. Keep this always in mind: 'structures do not get the work done'.

A well-known reproach to ASL and BiSL is that they do not give guidance on how to do the activities listed. This should not be expected, however. The frameworks only describe what to do because the actual implementation differs from one organization or one product to another. How the activities can be performed best is highly situation- and organization-dependent. The processes in a large organization differ from those in a small organization, in a formal organization from an informal one, in an organization at one location from an organization with many locations, in a rapidly changing organization from a stable one, in an organization that has direct contacts with end users from a supplier only etc., etc. That is also the reason why in ASL and BiSL there is so much emphasis on the identification, provision and use of best practices. ASL and BiSL are placed in the ASL BiSL foundation where working groups are actively collecting, improving and distributing best practices, which are made available via the website. Such a best practice can be picked up, evaluated and in some cases customized to your own situation. Sometimes the latter is not possible, because what is a best practice for one organization might be the worst practice ever for another.

Question: Why aren't the names of the three levels of ASL and BiSL 'operational', 'tactical' and 'strategic'?

In the theory of ASL and BiSL three levels are identified: operational, managing and strategic (See Figures 1 and 2). These terms are deliberately chosen. The levels are as follows:

- *Operational level:* the more or less daily, primary tasks of application management and business information management.
- *Managing level:* the control of the operational processes, the strategic processes, and the management processes themselves. Scope: month, quarter, year.

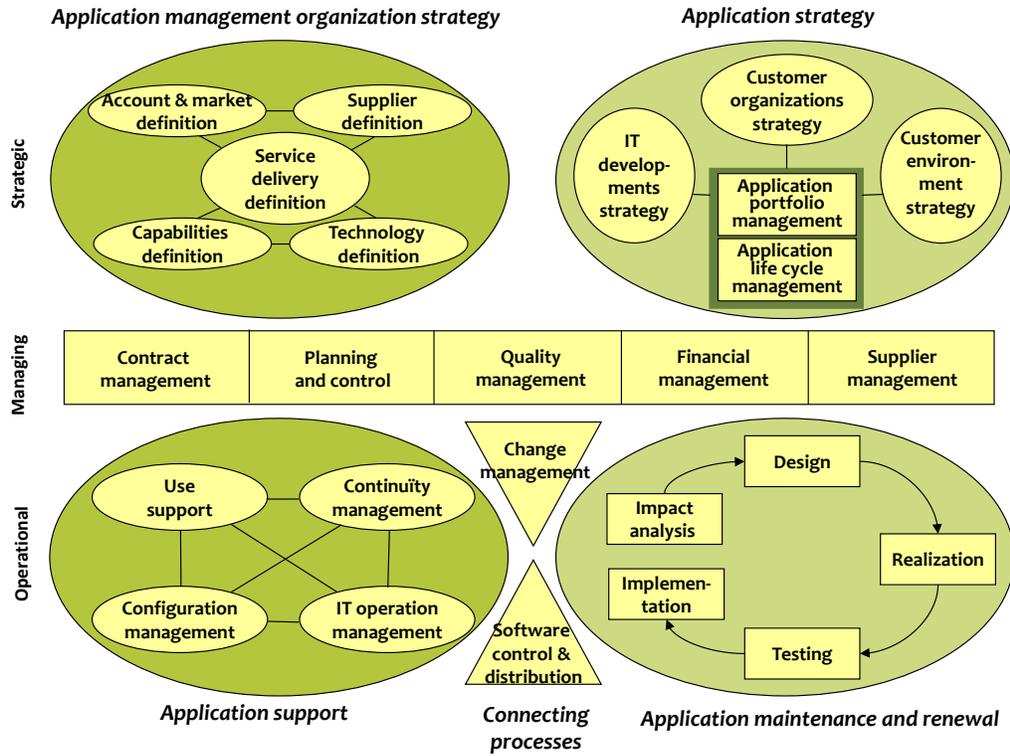


Figure 1 The ASL 2 framework

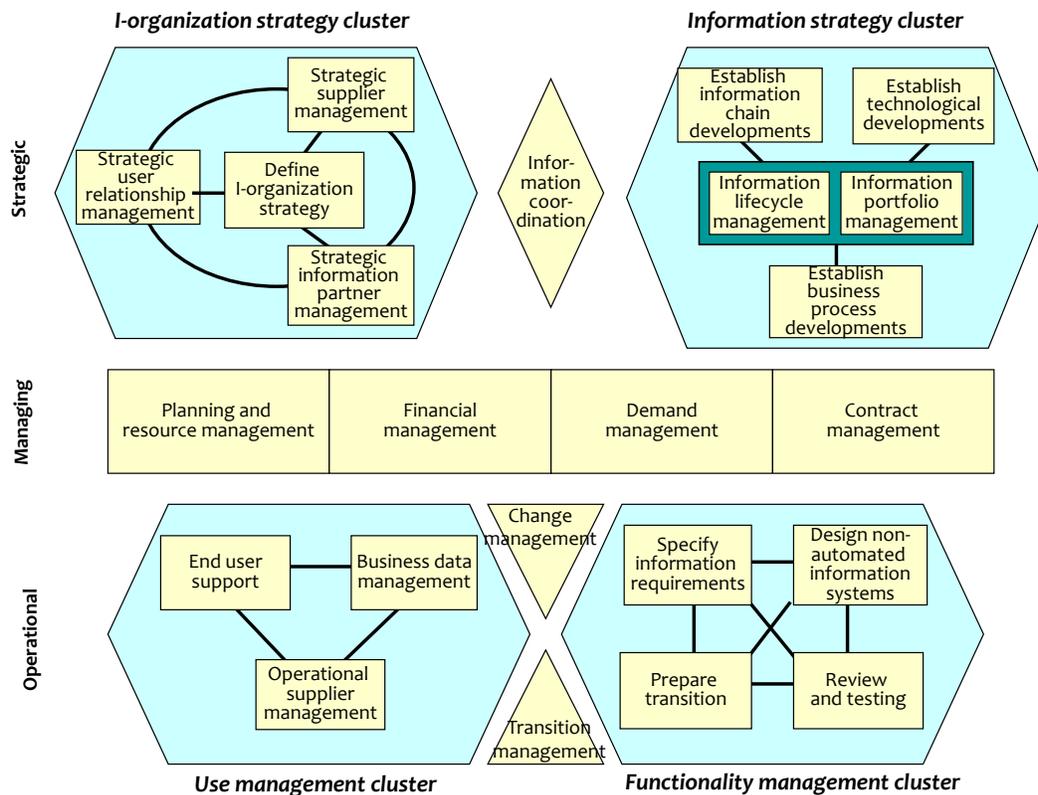


Figure 2 The BiSL framework

- *Strategic level*: designing the future of the applications and the application management organization (ASL) or the future of the business information management organization or the information provisioning (BiSL). Scope: where are we going in the next 2-5 years.

Yet many people talk about operational, tactical and strategic. These terms are not opaque. Specify information requirements or Demand management may, for example, be very strategic for one organization but for another one much less so. A process like Continuity management and the activities within it are largely not operational, but rather tactical or strategic in nature. Change management also has many tactical elements. The current term covers the overtones better.

Question: Why is the BiSL Demand management process not called Quality management?

Demand management within BiSL is about whether the information provision and the management thereof within an organization are of the right quality. The name of the process is not Quality management because that is a rather internally oriented term. What matters most is that the quality of products, processes and services is determined based on the needs or demands of the organization, i.e. the business process.

Also, on this level, the more tactical needs of the organization are input, for example innovation projects and the projects as a result of legislative changes are initiated. To us, the best name for the process seemed to be Demand management.

In ASL, Quality management is mostly positioned internally: focused on internal control, together with Planning and control. It provides input to Supplier management in the form of requirements for the quality that should be purchased externally.

The BiSL process Demand management does not correspond with the ITIL process Demand management. The ITIL approach to this process is that it is a risk to the IT service provider when the demand for IT services is not properly managed. Therefore, the demand for IT services has to be predicted as well as possible. It is seen as a strategic/tactical process that serves as input for Capacity management. It is about being able to predict how much demand there is for a particular service (quantity). It thus has a narrower scope than Demand management within BiSL and is more like a topic within Operational supplier management. Demand management focuses on defining the required information provision and its quality, based on the needs of the business. It defines the total demand and is, therefore, wider.

Misconception: The boundaries of the management domain 'functional management' should be equal to the boundaries of a functional management department.

Functional management (FM) is the name of one of the three IT management areas as defined by Looijen over ten years ago. In BiSL the entire domain is described, from operations to strategy, under the name of business information management. In practice, you often see that the responsibility for the processes on the strategic level lies within an information management department and for the operational processes in one or more functional management departments. The processes on the

managing level may be performed by an information management department, a functional management department, a team manager FM or a business information manager. That does not mean, however, that BiSL's operational and managing processes are all carried out by that information management department or FM team. Often some activities of the Information strategy cluster are carried out by a separate architecture club, and End user support is done by key users in the user organization or, in part, by a service desk.

It quite regularly happens that the functional management department maintains the functional design. By doing so they perform a task in the field of application management. Is that bad? Not necessarily, although it is usually recommended to clearly separate the roles of customer and supplier. BiSL and ASL do not prescribe how you should perform processes or where the tasks have to be carried out; the frameworks only offer an overview of the two domains, thus giving insight into what things you should or could arrange.

In the world of software packages or ASP (Application Service Provider) and SaaS (Software as a Service) the tasks are even more divided. Some of the functional management tasks are carried out by the suppliers and part of the tasks by the customers.

Question: Why is there no separate Incident management process?

Within ASL handling an incident is part of the process Use support; within BiSL it is part of End user support. ASL and BiSL do not limit themselves to real incidents (disruptions), rather the processes mentioned also handle questions, wishes, complaints, etc. Therefore handling of service requests is part of it. This is in contrast to ITIL which has a separate process for this.

Incident management has been described in a number of frameworks and standards but, very often, the emphasis was on handling the incidents (reactive). There should be more emphasis on proactive communication with the aim of preventing incidents. By communicating well with users, user organizations and exploitation parties many incidents may be prevented, for example by indicating how the application should be used correctly or by translating incident-related lessons quickly and effectively into proactive communication.

Therefore within Use support and End user support two sub-processes are defined that have a natural connection: Call handling and Proactive communication in ASL, and Call handling and User communication within BiSL. So incident management is covered and also some extras are offered.

Misunderstanding: In ASL and BiSL the Problem management process is absent.

In ASL and BiSL Problem management is deliberately not defined as a separate process but as a part of Quality or Demand management, respectively. Structural improvement activities that serve to improve services and to prevent disruptions in the service provision come not only from incidents but also from all processes. For example there might be multiple causes for finding many errors in the user acceptance test. Was the acceptance test thorough enough? Have the application administrators that performed the unit test and the functional and technical system test done their work well? Or had the user other expectations and were the specifications and the functional design not in order? Structural measures within application management may include: training in testing or designing, a course in working with a

'customer focus', and so on. Within business information management the measures may include identifying better user representatives for specifying and testing.

Improvement loops and improvement activities are a primary topic of the Quality management and Demand management processes. Hence Problem management is ranged there as a sub-process.

Misunderstanding: Functional managers should create and maintain the functional design.

In BiSL one finds the Specify information requirements process and in ASL the Design process. In practice, the distinction between these two leads to some confusion, because a functional design is also sometimes referred to as functional specifications. Regularly you will see that creating a functional design is a task laid down by the functional managers. Yet that is not logical.

If an application needs to be built or adapted, business information management is responsible for specifying the functional requirements (also called user specifications). Indicating how these will be included in the application is a task of application management. This is a functional design. To be able to adjust a functional design one needs knowledge of the structure of the application. For the user organization it is not necessary to know that structure. They should be able to identify what they need but not how it is designed. Specifying requirements deals with the problem (question) and is a task of the functional managers (business information administrators) and designing deals with the solution (supply) and therefore should be carried out by application management. Creating and maintaining a functional design should therefore be covered by application management.

Question: Why is a technical design set up in the Realization process of ASL and not in the Design process?

The functional design is a document that is tuned in consultation with the customer (i.e. the functional manager) and often is approved by the customer. Thereby it is a part of the contract. Therefore, a clear transition from Design to Realization is handy.

In practice, the technical design has a close relationship with the software. Often the same people draw it up. Often, especially nowadays, the technical considerations are described in the program documentation and not in a separate technical design.

Misunderstanding: In ASL, the Configuration management process is included twice and in BiSL it is forgotten.

Within ASL the operational level consists of three process clusters: the Application support processes on the left, the Maintenance and renewal processes on the right and the Connecting processes in-between. Indeed, two of the processes are concerned with the topic of managing the configuration: Configuration management within the Application support processes and Software control and distribution within the Connecting processes (see Figure 1).

Configuration management

The processes in the ASL Application support cluster are only concerned with the production situation and not with the maintenance situation. Therefore, Configuration management is only concerned with those configuration items that are in production. The software items that are being maintained are not

part of this process. Configuration management is about what version of the software is running in which production environment and also about which service agreements are made with which customers. With customized applications usually there is only one production environment. In contrast, software packages usually involve multiple production environments. Configuration management is a more important and more difficult process then. In Configuration management within application management it is often sufficient to know which version is running where.

Software control and distribution

Software control and distribution is aimed at managing and distributing software items. This involves the following four activities:

1. Storing software items.
2. Recording information about software items: which versions are where, in which phase of the maintenance process, in which technical environment.
3. Transferring (releasing) software items from one environment to the other. That is to say: throughout the DTAP street, from releasing for maintenance through the various development environments (D), test environments (T), the acceptance test environments (A) and finally to the production environments (P).
4. Providing information about the previous two points, for example to the Impact analysis process.

This process does indeed include activities in the field of managing configuration items, but focused on the maintenance situation, while the Configuration management process is about the production situation. Within Software control and distribution, it is important to record which versions are in which release.

Configuration management within BiSL

In BiSL there is no Configuration management process, although in business information management objects are managed as well, such as contracts, manuals and working instructions. This is done from the reasoning that managing those objects is not one of the primary activities and the management of these objects can also take place within the processes where the objects are created. Given the importance of document management in organizations, more attention to managing documents that are relevant for the information provision seems to be in place. Opinions about this differ, however.

Question: Where are decisions taken on changes, contracts etc.?

Decision-making on changes in functionality, contracts etc., takes place within business information management. Application management advises and gives its own preconditions. Application management and infrastructure management are indeed responsible for the contracts with their own suppliers and for changes within their mandate.

Misunderstanding: The authors of BiSL have forgotten the authorization management process.

In the BiSL book you have to look closely to find activities relating to the authorization management process. Yet, a number of tasks can be clearly indicated:

1. Providing, modifying and withdrawing authorizations in response to requests/assignments from the user organization.
2. Providing, modifying and withdrawing authorizations in response to changes in the information provision.
3. Recording of and reporting on authorizations.
4. Translating business roles into authorization profiles.
5. Specifying authorization requirements for the automated and the non-automated information provision.
6. Providing assignments in the field of IT authorizations.
7. Capturing authorization levels regarding business data.

These activities belong to different processes: End user support (1, 3, 4), Business data management (3, 7), Operational supplier management (6), Specify information requirements (5) and Transition management (2). Due to this diversity no separate authorization management process is recognized within BiSL. The core of the responsibility lies in the End user support process. We agree with the critics that the subject authorization management is somewhat underexposed in the BiSL book. This also applies to topics such as licensing, security management, conversion and perhaps some others.

Misunderstanding: The authors have forgotten the security management process.

ASL does not describe a separate security management process.

The reasons are:

- This aspect is addressed within the Continuity management process, where the continuity and the vulnerability of information systems are discussed.
- Security is an important part of the functionality of an application, so it is handled within the requirements for the application and defined in the Design process and within the service levels that are specified in the Contract management and Supplier management processes.

Within BiSL, the subject is discussed within the Operational supplier management process and, between the lines, in Demand management. To recognize this more easily, more explicit attention to the subject would be desirable.

Question: Which common roles are part of business information management?

Among others: functional manager, business information administrator, information manager, key user, business analyst, information analyst, acceptance tester, contract manager, chief information officer, data manager, data administrator, project manager, programme manager, administration organization expert, business architect, information architect, process owner, system owner, product owner, are roles that are part of business information management and therefore perform activities described in the BiSL framework.

Misunderstanding: Projects are not part of business information management.

A project often has its own temporary organization to perform its tasks. It is not directly linked to the line organization but placed next to it. The customer (principal) of a project in which the information provisioning of an organization is changed is a representative of the business organization (in most cases and by preference). During the project usually activities have to be performed within the user

organization as well as within IT. The general project manager of such a multidisciplinary project should therefore act on behalf of the user organization. He/she must be accountable to the project board (if appointed) and have the authority to manage project employees from the user organization. If a project board has not been appointed, the project leader is accountable to the senior customer (generally, the system/business process owner).

A project is also a part of the business information management domain. For example: Planning and control has the objective of planning and monitoring all activities of the organization related to information provisioning and, therefore, this includes projects. Projects are also a part of the long-term (annual) plans for information provisioning that are drawn up within Planning and control.

When the project is finished the management of the changed information provisioning is taken over by the business information administrators. BIM knowledge can also be deployed in a project. In practice, the management and maintenance parties are often involved (too) late in a project, though they are major acceptors. A possible cause is that Prince2 does not mention them as one of the important stakeholders. By properly applying BiSL, and thus not regarding projects unrelated to the BIM organization, this would have to improve in the future.

With this paper we hope to have contributed to the removal of a number of uncertainties regarding ASL and BiSL.

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