

BACKGROUND

A Minimum Business Increment (MBI) is the smallest chunk of work from which we can realize business value. An **MBI Mindset** is one where, to obtain a specific goal or outcome, we always attempt to discover and select the *minimum scope needed* to realize the desired goal/outcome.

In the context of an MBI, this means we apply the MBI Mindset to every scope element initially defined in the MBI, as far as we go down. That means it applies to the “features” or “epics” or “very large stories” that make up the MBI, as well as to the smaller team backlog items that contribute to those. It even goes as far as the actual implementation: a programmer will constantly challenge such things as how much code is really needed (such as number of methods) in order to realize the goal/value or how much testing is really needed. This is the antithesis to Waterfall/big-batch. It is the antithesis to gold-plating.

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Here is a thought experiment to help you understand how this works. It explores how even though a backlog item may only express one desired outcome, it usually requires multiple things in order to achieve that outcome.

Suppose you are working on a system that requires an Email Client. At the highest level (let’s call this Level 1), most end-user email clients (such as Outlook or Gmail) expose major capabilities such as the following:

1. The Email Client

- 1.1 The ability to authenticate (log in) to an email account
- 1.2 The ability to list the emails that have been received into that email account
- 1.3 The ability to display the contents of a received email
- 1.4 The ability to author an email
- 1.5 The ability to send an email
- 1.6 The ability to delete an email
- 1.7 The ability to print an email
- 1.8 The ability to organize emails in some way to make it more manageable
- 1.9 The ability to maintain a list of contacts (custom name & email) for easy identification and authoring

- 1.10 The ability to automatically reject or filter out emails
- 1.11 The ability to set up automatic replies, like an out-of-office or vacation note

When deciding to create a new email client, applying an MBI Mindset will lead you to enumerate these Level 1 capabilities (1.1 through 1.11 above) and then select the minimum capabilities you need that will result in realizing Business value. Say you select 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 1.6 as must-have capabilities and we postpone 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 1.10, and 1.11 for a later date. The MBI will now look list this:

1. MBI 1 - Email Client Proof of Concept

- 1.1 The ability to authenticate (log in) to an email account
- 1.2 The ability to list the emails that have been received into that email account
- 1.3 The ability to display the contents of a received email
- 1.4 The ability to author an email
- 1.5 The ability to send an email
- 1.6 The ability to delete an email

However, when you look at each of the Level 1 capabilities, you will find that each one has multiple possible sub-capabilities. When deciding to implement

one of these Level 1 capabilities from the MBI (such as **1.1 The ability to authenticate (log in) to an email account**), applying the MBI Mindset will lead you to enumerate the possible sub-capabilities of 1.1. You might come up with the following:

1. The Email Client MBI 1 - Email Client Proof of Concept

- 1.1 The ability to authenticate (log in) to an email account
 - The ability to log in using a username & password
 - The ability to log in using the currently authenticated corporate domain account
 - The ability to log in using any corporate domain account & password
 - The ability to log in using a third-party authentication service, such as Facebook or LinkedIn

Next, the MBI Mindset will lead you to pick which of these sub-capabilities are absolutely necessary for **MBI 1 - Email Client Proof of Concept**. Well, this depends on what we're trying to prove.

If the proof of concept is really focused around having an email client that can handle third-party authentication, then you can limit MBI 1 to third-party authentication and postpone the other three. Choosing this, MBI 1 now looks like this:

1. The Email Client MBI 1 - Email Client Proof of Concept

- 1.1 The ability to authenticate (log in) to an email account
 - The ability to log in using a username & password
 - ~~The ability to log in using the currently authenticated corporate domain account~~
 - ~~The ability to log in using any corporate domain account & password~~
 - The ability to log in using a third-party authentication service, such as Facebook or LinkedIn
 - ◆ Facebook
 - ◆ LinkedIn
- 1.2 The ability to list the emails that have been received into that email account
- 1.3 The ability to display the contents of a received email

- 1.4 The ability to author an email
- 1.5 The ability to send an email
- 1.6 The ability to delete an email

We do this every single time we look at a requirement no matter how big or how small it is; this is because there is almost always more than one next-level thing that could be selected. And this means there are more things we should *exclude* from the MBI. Here is MBI 1 with items crossed off the list.

1. The Email Client MBI 1 - Email Client Proof of Concept

- 1.1 The ability to authenticate (log in) to an email account
 - The ability to log in using a username & password
 - ~~The ability to log in using the currently authenticated corporate domain account~~
 - ~~The ability to log in using any corporate domain account & password~~
 - The ability to log in using a third-party authentication service, such as Facebook or LinkedIn
 - ◆ Facebook
 - ◆ LinkedIn
- 1.2 The ability to list the emails that have been received into that email account
 - Default list attributes to display
 - ◆ ~~Customize list attributes to display~~
- 1.3 The ability to display the contents of a received email
 - Plain Text Formatting
 - ◆ ~~Rich Text Formatting~~
 - ◆ ~~HTML Formatting~~
- 1.4 The ability to author an email
 - Address to single recipient
 - ◆ ~~Address to multiple recipients~~
 - ◆ ~~Ability to carbon copy (CC) recipients~~
 - ◆ ~~Ability to blind carbon copy (BCC) recipients~~
 - ◆ ~~Ability to provide alternate reply to email address~~
 - Plain Text Formatting
 - ◆ ~~Rich Text Formatting~~
 - ◆ ~~HTML Formatting~~
- 1.5 The ability to send an email
 - Send immediately
 - ◆ ~~Send at timed intervals~~
 - ◆ ~~Send at a custom time~~

- 1.6 The ability to delete an email
 - Permanently delete
 - ~~Send to trash (for recovery)~~
 - ~~The ability to print an email~~
 - ~~The ability to organize emails in some way to make it more manageable~~
 - ~~The ability to maintain a list of contacts (custom name & email) for easy identification and authoring~~
 - ~~The ability to automatically reject or filter out emails~~
 - ~~The ability to set up automatic replies, like an out-of-office or vacation note~~

The MBI Mindset tells us that this is the true essence of thin vertical slicing, of agile software development, and of lean value realization. If we do not do this at any level, then we are allowing waste to be created such as unnecessary or unused things, unnecessary complexity that has to be tested and maintained, and unnecessary delays in achieving the desired outcome.

TRY THIS WITH YOUR TEAM

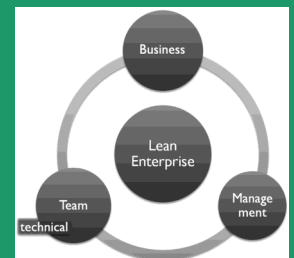
This thought experiment serves the place of a template. Now, try to use this approach with something you are already working on or have been asked to work on. Discuss this with your team to get their feedback. Likely, you will find that there is usually a lot more scope left unspecified by the people requesting a “story” or “feature.” And likely, they are leaving it to the developers and testers to figure out the missing detail.

Here is what to do.

1. Start with a Team Backlog item of some kind, such as a Feature or a Story. Let the team guide you through the sequential elaboration and scope identification.
2. Ask the team to estimate how much effort or how long it would take to develop and test all of the potential scope that has been identified.
3. Review with the requester the identified potential scope to see if all of it is actually necessary to realize the desired outcome of the backlog item.
4. Once it has been “de-scoped” to the absolute minimum required to realize the desired business value (the desired outcome), ask the team to estimate the newly de-scoped backlog item.
5. Discuss with the team how much initial development and testing effort was saved and compare this with how much effort it took to identify and descope. Usually this alone is a significant enough savings to motivate teams to want to invest in doing this approach whenever possible.
6. Review this with the requester and discuss their reaction. Unless they are already using an MBI Mindset, this should come as a surprise!

NET OBJECTIVES

We are committed to delivering the principles, practices, and perspectives that businesses must know in order to maximize their return on their technology solution and software development efforts. We combine our experience and a time proven approach based on lean thinking to continuously extend the capability of what is possible in creating effective technology delivery organizations (IT or product). We provide these learned methods to our clients to assist them in achieving their goals and in assisting them in making their organizations more successful.



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