# Concept Modelling
## With Ron Ross

On the 4th March 2021, Ron Ross joined me on an edition of 'On The Spot' to discuss the important (and often misunderstood topic) of *concept models*. You can see the original broadcast here. If you'd rather read an edited transcript of our discussion you'll find that below. You can view previous episodes by visiting onthespot.today

Please note, this is an edited version of an automated transcription. We apologise for any mis-transcriptions or typos! *-- Adrian*

**Ron Ross**
*Co-founder & Principal Business Rules Solutions*

**Adrian Reed**
*Principal consultant*

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

**Adrian Reed:** Hello and a very warm welcome to today's "On The Spot": the 15 minute, coffee-break shaped episode that explores interesting ideas in and around business change and business analysis. I'm really pleased today to be joined by Ron Ross. I'm sure everyone watching will know of Ron's work in the business rules community, you may well have read one or many of Ron's books, the one that I've read most recently is "Business Knowledge Blueprints". If you're a business analyst, I definitely recommend you take a look at this. Ron, I was looking on Amazon at the books you've written? Are you the same Ron G. Ross that wrote some books in the 90s about data dictionaries?

**Ron Ross:** Well, actually, I think I'm the person who wrote the very first book on data dictionaries and meta modelling. That came out in 1981 so I'm surprised you can still find it. Okay, it's out there. So sometimes people accuse me of not knowing anything about meta modelling. I beg to differ!

**Adrian Reed:** Fantastic! Today we're going to talk about concept modelling. I think it's fair to say that this is a topic that is often misunderstood. So Ron, how would you describe concept modelling? And why is it important?

**Ron Ross:** I think, at a very basic level, it's fairly easy to understand because it's simply a structured business glossary. Lots of people need to build business glossaries, we need to define our terms, we need to organise the vocabulary in a way that's accessible and structured and sensible, and non-contradictory. So it brings some semantics to the table to help you produce better definitions and definitions that stick together collectively as well as individually. So first and foremost, it's just simply a way of building a business glossary. But there's a lot more to it than that, because I'm looking at it as a way of developing shared understanding. You know, unless you get everybody on the same page, early in projects and initiatives, you're going to find it difficult, you're going to stumble over miscommunications and hidden ambiguities all the way through. So we think of it as a deliberate, structured sort of "engineering approach" to developing a shared understanding. Now, there's a lot more to it than that. I could go on, if you want to.

**blackmetric**

**Adrian Reed:** It's interesting. I originally worked in the insurance industry and before I had heard of concept models, I was already building elements of them (probably quite badly!) In the insurance industry, there are terms like "claim". Now a "claim" is different than an "incident" and an "incident" is different than an "incident report". Because an incident occurs, there's an incident report, which may or may not become a claim, because some things are reported for notification purposes only. And you have a policy and a policy has covers or coverages, which are made up of perils, and all these things are really important, but I found that people in the actual business would use words quite imprecisely. So they'd say claim when what they really meant was was incident. By having what was basically a glossary meant that we were able to avoid a whole bunch of pain that would have happened if we taking stuff at face value. Is that the kind of thing?

**Ron Ross:** Yeah. In fact beyond that a lot of people, when they say claim, they actually mean the amount of the claim, the dollar amount. And so we confuse the quantity of something I like to say the quantity of something with "the something", those are two different things. And you know, you stumble over that a lot. So insurance is rife with examples, but in our experience, every business, every area of knowledge, let's say every body of knowledge has the same process. Yeah, the same problems. And by the way, that even extends to the professional discipline of, of Business Analysis.

**Adrian Reed:** Yeah, absolutely!

**Ron Ross:** In my experience, and chatting with people, they don't always mean the same things when they use words in our discipline.

**Adrian Reed:** Oh, yeah! Even even the acronyms are used differently by different people. So we've talked about the "what" and "why" of concept models, so the next logical question, Ron will be "Who"? Who are they for? Who should create them? Who should be the consumers of them?

**Ron Ross:** Well, that covers a lot of territory. You know, one of the things I didn't mention, when describing the "what" was actually a concept model is a great way to attack data quality problems. Obviously, that's related to the kind of examples we were giving. But you might not think of data architects and information architects as being consumers or participants in this area. But absolutely they are, as are people who write business rules, which our firm does, a lot of that's sort of our area of specialty. Unless you have a blueprint to the knowledge and blueprint to the vocabulary, and it's structured, then you're going to struggle really to find the expressions that you want in order to bring out clarity in your rules. You and I just before this broadcast were talking about the difficulties of editing, and writing, and clarity. And that's right on the money. Data architects, and business architects, we find that another thing about concept models is that they will give you a stable platform, a stable architecture that will last not just years, but decades, because you're getting at the core knowledge, and there's no better way to build your development than around than. So the other people I should mention, is that it's primarily for business people.

This is a tool in terms of getting at semantics that business people can get engaged with, there's nothing behind the curtains, there's nothing hidden. It's all about bringing out the semantics in the meeting. So we deal with compliance managers and regulators and policy makers and even legal staff, knowledge managers, it really crosses the gamut of people who are involved with knowledge in one way or another in the organisation.

**Adrian Reed:** Which is, I suppose so many people, particularly in a knowledge or information focussed business. A question that Nurudeen asks: "Is it right to say that concept models demonstrate the linkages between elements in the glossary?"

**Ron Ross:** That's a good way to talk about it. Let me say it this way, it's because concept models, and it's based on a linguistic standard SBVR (Semantics of Business Vocabulary and Business Rules), that's where its origin is, but it focuses equally on nouns and verbs. And so when you say connections between "things", when we write, when we talk, just like we're doing now, we're using sentences, and how do you connect the nouns in these sentences? Well, you're using verbs. It was a surprising revelation to me that a lot of the ambiguities you run across are actually more to do with the verbs that are missing, or that are misstated than just the nouns. So yes, exactly. Right, right on target.

**Adrian Reed:** Yeah, those linkages. Our mutual friend Ryan from South Africa says "I'm a big fan of concept models without it, there is room for too much ambiguity". Which I think is again, of course spot on the on the money. Hi, Ryan. Glad you could tune in! And Lisa, gosh, Lisa, is someone I used to work with. So Lisa, hello, hope you're doing well. Lisa says "how do you maintain these concept models? What's your advice, as things are often set up and then disregarded once a project is over?" Which is true, isn't it? So often it's a project that creates the impetus to create something, and it could be such a useful reference, but eventually it dies. How do you stop it dying, Ron?

**Ron Ross:** We create it within some repository. Unless it's highly engaged in connected to the ongoing activities, the writing activities, whether they're requirements, business rules, or even compliance documents, whatever it is, and unless it's tied into the writing of things, it can go away. But I tell you, frankly, we had one client that called us in and after a decade, and I was wondering, since I hadn't heard from him in a decade. why are they calling me in. I said, "oh, god, what did we do?" and they had the concept model from 10 years ago laid out on the mahogany desk in the executive boardroom, because they realised it was their blueprint for the next generation of software. What I'm telling you is, once you engage management, and you engage business people, they're going to get it. They're going to realise that, hey, we can't do without this blueprint. So it very quickly becomes something that they depend on and want to keep around.

**Adrian Reed:** Yeah. Which leads us to the next question, which is how to get started. Because there will be people listening to this who work for organisations where there is no concept model at the moment, there might not even be knowledge of concept modelling. So how would you recommend getting started?

**Ron Ross:** Well, we always look, in one case, for problem terms, ones that are really giving us issues, you use the word claim, that's a great place to start, just jump in. Then you'll realise you have to explore a lot of additional terms and concepts to make sense of that. Or it could be sometimes stakeholders are very frustrated, because even the business analyst or some of the other requirements people are using IT speak, and not speaking the language of the business. That's a great way to back up and say, hey, let's talk business. Compliance people are often desperate for friends out there, I don't know if people realise this. But compliance, people really feel left out a lot. They often are people who can latch on to it, and dare I say it... if it's an agile project that's sort of looping its way out of control... I know that never happens! But that's a good way to bring some centrepiece to the table and say, hey, let's organise ourselves around the core knowledge of this problem, and then we can't go too far astray. Yeah, there are lots of opportunities to get started. Then it boils down to how do you personally get started? The point I always make is we're not taught in IT training or BA training, how to define terms. You think it just comes naturally and natively? It doesn't! You need some training, you need a little bit of reading, you know, the book is a good place to start. Learn the skills in that linguistic area. I don't know why it's outside of our training. But it's right on the mark.

**Adrian Reed:** Yeah. And that brings us to Gabriel who asks, "do you have a book on the topic?" And of course, yes. The book "Business Knowledge Blueprints" by Ron would be a an excellent place to start, I would suggest. Additionally, people may want other resources. Where would you recommend that people get information about these sorts of topics?

**Ron Ross:** Well, I think the best place to look is the website that we do, a public service website, brcommunity.com. It's been around a long time, and for the last year and a half or two years, I've been writing a lot of articles about concept models and they're bite-size and and more approachable. So if you want to convince yourself that there's something here for you, I would probably start looking at some of those articles or columns, really. And just read about it and find out how it might help you out. I think that's the way I'd start.

**Adrian Reed:** Fantastic. Excellent. And if people want to follow you on social media, Twitter, LinkedIn, they can find you there.

**Ron Ross:** Yeah. Ronald Ross on LinkedIN, Ronald_g_Ross on Twitter.