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Collaborative Requirements Management Improves Project Success

Margo Visitacion

Catalyst

A client inquiry

Question

We practice requirements management with our business analysts, but we still have problems meeting user expectations. What can Giga recommend?

Answer

Projects, whether building or procuring software, contain the same prime deliverable: meeting the stakeholders' goals. While stakeholders think they know what they want, the reality is often quite different. Requirements management (RM) is the key way of combating misconception. However, acting as a scribe for the stakeholder and having the task fall to the project manager or business analyst is not sufficient. Project collaboration starts at the requirements phase. Project teams must act collectively and proactively to increase stakeholder and team understanding beyond the requirements to their content and implications.

According to RM guru Karl Wiegars in his book, *Software Requirements*, productive RM processes "find and hear" the customer's voice through some of the following steps:

- Interviews: the most obvious way to gain descriptions of requirements

- Market competition studies: to gain insight into standards or regulations

- Problem report and other supported documents: to improve current functionality

- A "day in the life" observation of the customer: to gain understanding of the user's workflow

Giga agrees that these are useful steps in defining valid software requirements. Using them helps the team and the stakeholders maintain a single vision (see IdeaByte, Requirements Management Bridges Communication Gaps, Carl Zetie). In many cases, either the project manager or the business analyst assumes this role. Giga recommends extending the practice to include both technical and business leads to provide a more comprehensive vision. If this is not done, costly mistakes are easily made. For example, during the requirements phase of a commercial off the shelf (COTS) implementation project at a financial organization, a user requirement included a specific function that appeared to improve productivity. An application was selected, and the planning and execution phases of the project got under way. During this phase of building test scripts from the requirements specifications, the testing group could not match the expected result with the requested function. The testers interviewed the user again and discovered that several manual steps crucial to meeting the expected result — something that the application could not do without customization — had not been discussed during the initial requirements interviews. Additional development was required, pushing the project beyond its initial delivery date and resulting in a 25 percent cost overrun.

In any project, quality delivery implies that the software is available, reliable and satisfies customer

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expectations (see Planning Assumption, Implementing Requirements Management, Carl Zetie). Giga has long recommended the use of requirements management or collaboration tools to improve the requirements process, but to go further, try the following:

- Use your team members' different expertise to offer a wider perspective in improving the requirements process, thus saving precious project cost and effort later on. Assign various parts of the requirements process to team leads. Gaps found in one process can lead to closer analysis in other requirements, heading off potential problems.

- Keep requirements relevant by having iterative reviews. Empower your team to ask hard questions to get better-defined answers.

- Include the team in the process to ensure that there is no ambiguity: Sign-offs are not just for stakeholders.