Gathering Business Requirements

A critical element of any project is gathering the business requirements and creating a clear picture of what needs to be delivered. Project initiators generally have a clear view of the end goal, but rarely will have considered or understand all of the stakeholders specific requirements for the system being developed or purchased. Creating a complete set of requirements up front enables better planning, more accurate cost estimates, shorter delivery cycles and improves customer satisfaction and adoption of the final outcome. The seemingly simple task of gathering requirements must be done effectively or the entire project could be in trouble. This article will address some of the fundamental elements of gathering business requirements – though the concepts may seem simple, remember the importance of completing this task successfully.

Business analysts add value by understanding both the business needs and IT development constraints within the given environment. They work with business subject matter experts to develop a clear picture of what the business needs while also focusing on aligning these needs with the business objectives. At the same time they ensure requirements are written in language consumable by both the business users and IT designers. Bridging this gap is a key value-add business analysts bring to documenting business requirements.

At the start of a project the requirements are often somewhat vague. If you ask a few people what they think the requirements are you will likely get different perceptions of what is to be accomplished. The job of the business analyst is to work with the clients to help them gain a common vision of the business requirements.

The business analyst should start with the project sponsor to gain a clear understanding of the business goals and objectives of the project so all business requirements can be gathered in the correct context. Without this linkage you may find yourself gathering requirements considered out of scope or promoting individual agendas rather than the organization's vision.

When gathering requirements you are likely to meet all sorts of pitfalls, these can range from:

- Clients too busy or under tight deadlines;
- Clients assuming their requirements can be provided without their input;
- Fear of how the new system or product will affect / change their role;
- Differing personalities: some not willing to speak up or others being too expressive; and
- Geographic dispersion of clients.

As an experienced business analyst it is up to you to engage these clients. The time and effort required to gather requirements is small in comparison to the cost of delivering an end product that does not meet your client's business needs.

To get clients to provide open, honest input you need to build a level of trust. You can do this by getting to know their business, learn their language (no technical jargon… please) and generally create an environment that establishes rapport. The key is to show them you are really interested in understanding their business challenges and that you've done your homework on the project goals so you can truly help them move forward.

There are a broad range of approaches to gathering business requirements. All have their benefits and pitfalls, but when used in combination can help the business analyst produce superior results. The following are a few of the key approaches:

- One-on-one meetings can promote more detailed discussions. They help you gather requirements from individuals who may be prone to staying quiet in a group meeting, or help you uncover a fear of change which may allow you to understand or overcome their concerns. These meetings can also help you build trust with each stakeholder, understand their individual perspective and to provide you with valuable input to a group discussion on requirements.

- Group Interview meetings speed the process of gathering requirements. It allows group members to feed on the ideas of others to further their understanding and provide input they may not have otherwise considered.

- Facilitated sessions allow for much larger groups to further speed the process and may allow you to gather all requirements in one session and move the group toward consensus. This method requires a high degree of planning, a specific formal agenda and a strong and knowledgeable facilitator in order to make it a success (typically delivered after one-on-one sessions).

- Questionnaires are of limited value in gathering detailed requirements however they have their place in gathering feedback from remote or minor contributors or for gathering statistics, quick facts, or gaining answers from larger groups.

- Analysis by walking around is about spending a few days following people around – see what they do, how they do it. There is nothing more accurate than watching what really happens.

There are broad range of questions that can be raised in the requirements gathering session. The following are few of the primers you might want to consider:

- What are your business pain points?
- What challenges are you trying to solve?
- Why are you doing this?
- What is the expected business outcome? …How will it be measured?
- What does the final outcome look like?
- What limitation do you have today with your current processes? …technology? …resources?
- How do your requirements support the overall organizational business strategy, goals and objectives?
- How do your requirements help to meet / exceed the key business performance metrics?

These can be tough, open-ended questions for clients to answer. Give them the time to fully articulate their requirements. Avoid the common mistake of trying to rush them through so you can get on with building the end product. The best approach is to have multiple meetings allowing enough time between meetings for the organization to “digest” the outputs thus ensuring you are on the right track. A typical approach might include the one-on-one meetings with executives followed by an initial high-level visioning session with them. With the executive vision started you can then meet one-on-one with key clients and then facilitate several requirements sessions to drive out the details. At the end bring the executives and the working group together to solidify the project vision and business requirements.

Requirements gathering sessions are critical to your project's success and the process will require all your best interpersonal, business analysis and facilitation skills. You need to encourage clients to be open and honest in their participation. You can aid this process by asking the "obvious" questions to get the discussion going. It is important to have a clear understanding of the projects business requirements yourself. Be prepared for each meeting or session, listen carefully and then "playback" what you've heard to ensure you've captured it correctly. Consider using basic, easy-to-follow, diagrams to illustrate their requirements – remember it's easier for all of us to comprehend a picture than to interpret words.

Avoid the common pitfall of the business analyst who has performed other similar projects and feels they have all the answers and tell the client what their requirements are. Most of the time this approach results in projects that are significantly off-the-mark in terms of solving the actual business challenges.

There are several methodologies, techniques and tools that can be used to aid in the gathering and documenting of business requirements including:

- Rational Unified Process (RUP).
- Joint Requirements Planning (JRP) / Joint Application Design (JAD).
- Use Case.
- Unified Modeling Language (UML).

These approaches by themselves will not guarantee successful results but they can provide a framework for more effectively drawing out and documenting information.

Gathering accurate business requirements is a critical step to the overall success of your project. All projects have some specific business outcome they are attempting to achieve. The investment that you and your clients make in clearly and concisely gathering business requirements will provide your organization with a common framework upon which the remainder of the project can be structured. These requirements will provide the basis for testing; your decision on whether to build or buy; and will provide a key point of reference in terms of quality management and assessing changes to scope throughout the project.

Need more information?

Please call (604)294-2292 or email info@KLR.com