Ten Tips for Successfully Gathering Business Requirements

The success of any IT project is determined at the beginning of the project lifecycle, when the IT staff meets with business clients to gather requirements. But IT's track record with this important phase is somewhat abysmal. Requirements have been gathered for decades, but most IT organizations have yet to discover a consistently successful way of sitting down with business clients, discussing their needs and translating those needs into a useful system, enhancement, customization or software package selection.

In fact, according to some statistics, poor requirements gathering is the cause of about 70% of today's technology project failures. According to some calculations, each badly defined requirement results in 10 bad design statements, which then can multiply out to 100 incorrect coding statements. This is true whether you're looking to build a custom system, buy a new software package or enhance an existing system.

Here are 10 critical things you can do to improve your success the next time you are gathering requirements.

Top 10 List

10. Establish rapport. A successful interview requires establishing rapport with the person or people with whom you're partnering, which means allowing the conversation to naturally flow beyond a discussion of work and technology. Such camaraderie will go far when you inevitably run into conflicts, confrontations and other difficult conversations with the client in the future.

9. Communication is the key. There are specific ways to open the lines of communication. One idea is to conduct your interviews in the client's office, which will help set the client at ease. This also gives you the chance to look around the office for personal mementos such as photographs that reveal something about the client's personality or life outside of work. These are easy conversation starters that can encourage a natural flow of communication that will help when you get down to the business at hand.

8. Interview the right people. Chances are that multiple clients will need to be interviewed, so it would be wise for you to do some research ahead of time as to what pieces of information you need and who's the most likely source for that information. For each person you interview, know your objective.

7. Talk in the business language and use pictures (models). Another common interview mistake is for requirements gatherers to fail to establish a common language. Ask for definitions - acronyms in one industry can mean something else entirely in another industry, or even in another division of the same company! It's also very helpful to insert a picture-drawing phase into the process before jumping into the document-writing phase. This will create a clear communication tool that's easy for both IT and the client to see how everything connects and what's in and out of scope.

6. Don't assume, ask. If you concentrate on asking questions rather than making statements or not responding at all, you'll avoid two common errors that IT professionals make: making assumptions and forming arguments. If you have any doubt about whether you understand something, ask for clarification to check your understanding.

5. Don't solve the "problem" before you know WHAT it is. Don't jump to the solution. Many project managers and business analysts start shaping the solution to the client's needs before they really understand what those needs are in the first place (the "what").

4. Requirements are short, concise sentences. Requirements need to be expressed in short, simple sentences with their associated exceptions. Too often,

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one-sentence paragraphs are written that describe multiple requirements, which confuses everyone involved.

3. Use the power of MUST. Exceptions will kill you. "Must" is one of the most powerful words in the English language, because when we use it, there are no two ways about the statement you're making. "X must do Y," plain and simple, 100% of the time, no exceptions. When clients read a "must" statement, they're likely to respond, "No, actually, that shouldn't happen under these specific conditions." This helps us capture what's so easy to miss - the exceptions to the rule.

2. WHAT is a requirement, not HOW. You can't assume that the solution clients say they need is really the optimum one. Arriving at that requires digging underneath the surface, steering the client toward describing "what" they need to accomplish, not "how" they want something built. Project managers, business analysts and others need to learn to leave the "how" to the designers and consider their job to be getting to the "what."

1. Give the people WHAT they want. By following these steps you can have a thorough understanding of the clients request, and be successful by providing just what they are looking for.

This is based on Ouellette & Associates "Business Requirements Management" workshop, and excerpted from a chapter written by Charlie Duczakowski, from our newest book coming out in May 2008. O&A is committed to helping our clients achieve exceptional results. We provide in-house & public workshops and consulting focused on Developing the Human Side of IT. To learn more about O&A click here: info@ouellette-online.com or call us at 800-878-4551.

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