

21 Ways to Excel at Project Management

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Requirements Gathering for Software Projects

By Dave Nielsen, PMP

Capturing requirements can be the most challenging part of a software development project. If you don't get the requirements right, or miss key requirements, your project is in vain. Even if you do meet budget and schedule objectives, your project will fail to deliver the benefits your sponsors envisioned for it.

Here are some simple tips to follow in order to avoid a disaster. Be forewarned: these tips sound simple and straightforward, but can be very tricky to implement. This is not meant to be a complete set of instructions for managing requirements on any project, it is meant to help you avoid some common pitfalls.

1. Identify the right stakeholders to contribute requirements. The key stakeholders are the ones that will be using the software to conduct their business, the ones who will be maintaining it after deployment and the business sponsor. Exclude those who wish to influence the outcome of the project, but who don't have a stake in the success of the project. If you're given a list of stakeholders who should be included, verify that the list includes all the stakeholders.
2. Identify the right requirements capture tools and techniques. You should choose techniques that are a fit for the stakeholders who will be defining their requirements and are suitable for the organisation's makeup. For example, if your stakeholders are a geographically diverse group, techniques such as storyboarding or brainstorming will not work.
3. Work with your stakeholders to capture requirements in plain English. Requirements should speak to some aspect of the business benefit to be derived from the project. The requirement should be feasible (that is they should be possible to code by the development team). They should also be verifiable. To ensure a requirement is verifiable, ask the question: How are you going to test the requirement? If you don't get an answer to that question, you need to work on the requirement to convert it into something that is verifiable.
4. Define a schedule for the requirements gathering exercise that will allow building to start on time, and then stick to the schedule. Hold the stakeholders responsible for meeting their scheduled deadlines. Make sure the team understands that delivering requirements late will delay the project end date.
5. Identify the approver, or approvers, for the requirements; this is the person, or people, who your business sponsor empowers to speak on their behalf, if the sponsor is not to be responsible for sign-off. You will have to hold these people accountable for meeting the schedule deadlines. Don't proceed to the build phase without the requirements having been approved.
6. Identify each requirement with a unique id. This is the key to traceability. The id should be tracked in the functional specs, design specs and tests.

Learning project management best practices is one sure-fire way of controlling your project's requirements. If you aren't already PMP certified I suggest you find a good PMP course or PMP Exam preparation training product and get yourself certified. Meanwhile, I'll follow this article up with articles expanding on the tips.

Dave Nielsen is a principal with three O Project Solutions, the vendors of AceIt©. Dave was also the key architect responsible for the creation of the product. AceIt© has prepared Project Managers from around the world to pass their PMP exams. You can find endorsements from some of his customers on three O's web site <http://threeo.ca/testimonials48.php>

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