Good Requirements Don't Come Easy

By: Bonnie Walker

One of the most fundamental and operational tasks in project delivery is gathering requirements. A project manager's ability to manage scope has everything to do with clearly understanding the stakeholder's objectives, and that has everything to do with eliciting good requirements. "Requirements Discovery" is the foundation for improving project delivery. Without good requirements even the most capable Project Managers can find themselves managing the wrong project definition, albeit extremely well. At a recent meeting with one of the major Hartford based Insurance companies, the need to have BA's assist in defining the initial Project Assessment Team's estimates was discussed. They believe that this change has the potential to improve accuracy and their overall budgeting practices. This reflects a growing trend in the industry, one in which focus is placed on the front end of the project lifecycle in the hopes of reducing rework in the testing phase of the project.

Implementing a good Requirements Process (aka repeatable), in most cases, requires some cultural changes and executive commitment. Until now little time and money has been invested by companies to identify the training, skills and competencies required for good analysis. This is an industry issue and one that is deeply rooted in organizational culture and history. Many companies continue to struggle with their own internal history, with each history creating its own package of challenges. Some of these histories have resulted in BA's with specific technical competencies which create bias toward a particular technology or solution, and communication problems between BA and Business User. Other histories have produced highly technical business users who come to IT with *their* solution already mapped out, refusing to participate in Requirements Discovery. And for the most part the whole industry struggles with keeping title, role and function consistent. In one organization you maybe a "Business Analyst" performing the role of requirements gathering and in another a "Requirements Manager" performing analysis.

Not enough has been written on how investment in the front end of the project life cycle delivers returns. There is a need to demonstrate to business organizations the potential savings in time and money that can be realized when they invest in good requirements up front. Kathleen Barret of BMO Financial Group recently stated "Our organization is committed at the highest levels to realizing the full value of business analysis and the role of the BA. We will leverage good business requirements throughout Testing and QA. This is key to our CMMI initiative".

The following statistics from a study commissioned by BMO Financial Group support this position: "Projects can realize savings between 25 and 35% percent by employing robust requirements management processes" and "Over 80% of the mistakes found in system testing are made in the requirements definition phase of the program", and "***Finding a requirements problem during QA is 19 times more expensive than finding it at inception***" (Meta Group Requirements Definition Process Assessment November 2002).

Having skilled requirements gatherers in your organization is key to realizing the productivity gains promised by good requirements. Yet requirements elicitation remains one of the main stumbling blocks for most companies. While it is typically the Business Analyst who is tasked

with gathering requirements, he/she is most often hampered by two things: 1) Not having a repeatable gathering process to follow and 2) Organizational resistance to change.

Well developed BA's in clearly defined roles with a repeatable process should go a long way in overcoming internal challenges. Today companies are looking to each other for leadership in this area and recently there has been much activity in the training and professional development market with regard to the role of the Business Analyst. Companies are beginning to realize that Business Analysts need to be recognized for their contribution and rewarded with a clearly defined career path. Now that the industry is demanding standards, has identified competencies and provided role definitions, businesses can expect to see a new wave of professionals with a solid set of demonstrable skills. Perhaps eliciting requirements is a good place to start.

While the future looks bright, the current demand for Requirements expertise is high and some companies are opting to outsource their requirements gathering efforts. The best case scenario may be partnering with a solution provider that will gather requirements while training your BA's in the same process. With large insurance companies and financial institutions such as BMO Financial Group leading the way, in pursuit of competency based internal accreditation programs, clear returns on investment and competitive advantages are sure to follow.

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