Crisp and Clear User Requirements –
Wouldn't It be Nice?

By Ken Sadler

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Crisp and clear user requirements for your project are a challenge at the best of times. Projects bring together people, technology, and processes, and we add budget to make it a project. Gathering User Requirements is a core success factor for your project to achieve its business goals. How do we get them, and how do we keep them up-to-date?

Let's step back a bit and see what you want and what the business wants' Your users want to increase sales volumes, increase the company's market share, maximize long term cash flows, improve economic profit, and create economic value-add. To achieve these objectives, they create business initiatives or strategies for the company. Some initiatives form into projects. What you want are crisp and clear user requirements so that your project team can be successful and hit a home run for the company!

But your business environment may have other thoughts. Business has high demands for results. You have to recognize the speed with which your company needs to act to be successful. And… you need to realize how quickly your users need to continue to act to be successful. This means results from you and results from me – every day. My users do not have time for lunch or coffee some days. Do yours? You need their input and consensus on the project's user requirements but they have no time for you.

The role of user requirements has changed from one of designing "right", to a tool for modeling business processes to achieve a new or changed business strategy. In the past, user requirements were a bridge documenting the "business design" of the project. They were documented to ensure needs and expectations were final before the technical team started developing systems and redesigning processes. Today the focus is to document the model of the business which information is delivering. The
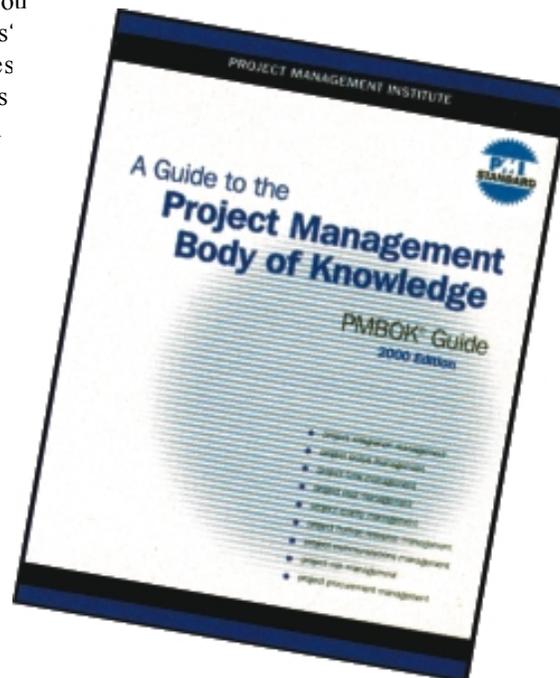
important aspects are "understood" more than designed in detail. What a screen or report looks like is less important than what information the screen or report contains.

Remember that a project is temporary. The Project Management Book of Knowledge, (PMBOK) guide calls it: "A Project is a *temporary* endeavor undertaken to create a *unique* product or service." And, "Project Management is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities in order to meet or exceed stakeholder needs and expectations from a project." We talk about meeting cost, schedule, and scope objectives. Think on a higher plane. "A project is successful when it meets its business objectives!" There is no better measure of success than that!

We have all worked on projects which did not give the users exactly what they expected. Sometimes it is due to people changing jobs inside the company so the users at the start of the project are different from the users at the finish. Adjust to it, it happens in successful companies. It is important to connect with the business at the right level. Make sure you deal with the users who use the system day-to-day for detailed user requirements – not just their bosses.

Well done user requirements and the quality and change they bring to the business are what insure a project is successful. Get clear requirements at the start. Keep them accurate and meaningful as the project progresses. If there is any change in the business, check to see whether it affects user requirements. Every project has implementation success factors. Accurate user requirements are a success factor to your project and they are to your business.

The user requirements carry the success of your project's business objectives. Tell your users what you are doing, gathering user requirements and the purpose. Tell them you, not the user, are going to document the requirements. Explain why you need them to review what you prepare. Explain you will build flexible

requirements that allow them to change their mind if business dictates it. Check with your key stakeholders if any changes occur which affect the project or the business.

Find out what the critical success factors are for the information requirements. You do this by sitting back and thinking about it. You find out by asking your users. Often the people pushing back against your project are the ones with the good ideas. They know why such and such is important. Your project has an impact on the business. Having the right business model is the most important element of your user requirements. Your company may have standards for information requirements gathering.

If not, companies such as the Project Management Institute, PMI, have standard templates you can buy. Adjust your requirements to fit your audience. Some users enjoy being on projects, some don't. Adjust your style, read your audience. You may want crisp and clear user requirements. Think for a moment what your users want. They respect that you are detailed. They want to understand you and what you are doing. They want you to understand them and what they are talking about. They want the company to win with this project.

Talk their language, learn their short forms, expect them to learn a few IS short forms. Management make decisions intuitively, expect them to do that with

your user requirements. The project lead or project manager in charge of user requirements has to learn enough about the business to think like their user about his/her requirements. When user requirements are approved, the project manager is at that meeting.

Do not have long meetings – your users do not have the time. Scrap the 2-3 day JAD sessions unless you are building space capsules. They scare busy people. Meet with the business when they are free, always respect their time. Initial meetings set the tone and rapport so be sharp, enthusiastic. Do not interview people by checking things off or filling in a form. They are not certain you are understanding them if you do. Remember action items come out of every meeting and recap at the end of the meeting. When you are done, you are done. Get out of there!

Do IS teams still ask for signoffs of user requirements? Yes, distribute the user requirements electronically and accept an e-mail sign-off from users as their approval. Realize that they signoff because you understand what they want – because they respect your leadership. Do not delegate. The project manager asks for the signoffs. Do not call a meeting for this – it wastes their time.

In summary, stay focused on the scope of your user requirements. Move fast, the business changes. Your users get promoted, some objectives change before you cross the finish line. These are all elements of a successful project! Your user requirements drive the core business objectives of the project. Done well guarantees a win and that alone exceeds the standard for over half the projects out there. T◻G

Ken Sadler heads up the Supply Chain Systems for Coca Cola Enterprises in Toronto His team develops and leads SAP - centric solutions which are used throughout North America for CCE. They provide SAP solutions that support Planning, Production, Transportation, Inventory Control, and Warehouse Management. He can be reached at 416-424-6305 or via e-mail at kesadler@na.cokecce.com.

The 5th Wave
By Rich Tennant

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