

A Word with the Wise: Piecing Requirements with Ellen Gottesdiener

by Joseph McAllister

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There are many pieces to the software requirements puzzle, according to Ellen Gottesdiener. "First of all, you have to know where you're going," she says. "Having a clear vision for what the product needs to accomplish, while at the same time--from a project management point of view--understanding the constraints that are at play, is really important."

Ellen is the founder and principal consultant of EBG Consulting, as well as the author of "Requirements by Collaboration: Workshops for Defining Needs" and "The Software Requirements Memory Jogger: A Pocket Guide to Help Software and Business Teams Develop and Manage Requirements."

In addition to starting out with a clear vision, she says teams should perform stakeholder analysis to understand who the players are.

"I like to put [the stakeholders] in different categories, analyze them, and figure out how important are their requirements to this product," she says. "How do we want to consider their needs? And, very importantly, how do we involve them in the requirements process?"

Another key piece of the puzzle is to understand the important business terms used in the project.

"The solution to this is simply creating a glossary of business terms, but it's amazing how much energy and effort is lost by people who are talking about the same thing differently, or a different thing using the same term," Ellen says. "Those business glossary terms need to be defined clearly up front-- just a small group, usually, and the glossary will grow."

These basic steps are like the edge pieces of the puzzle--a framework within which the requirements will be developed through elicitation, analysis, specification, and validation.

And the craft of requirements development doesn't even necessitate that a team be familiar with requirements software, Ellen says. Team members can learn about their needs through models and techniques

as simple as telling a story or sequencing case steps on note cards taped to a wall.

"They're building the model and articulating what their business is all about through the model," she says. "The models provide a structure for loading the content and subject matter expertise that the business customers have, so that you don't have to spend a lot of time educating them on software development. They build their requirements and then learn about the process by just doing it."

Many of the teams with which Ellen works use software tools as "low-tech" as Excel spreadsheets for requirements management, while others prefer more robust, requirements-specific tools.

"I myself am tool agnostic, so the tool that the organization already has in place is what we use," she says. "And if [the organization is] thinking about requirements management tools, I would first say, 'First tell me about how you manage the requirements today.' If they don't have good practices in place from a low-fidelity point of view, getting the tool ends up becoming a big mistake."

Ellen also believes that tools meant to help build prototypes quickly have not yet evolved enough. "What I find, quite frankly, is that using low-fidelity tools like markers, walls, and sticky notes is much more effective," she says. "Whether it's an exploratory prototype that's a throwaway or a prototype that could actually evolve into the end product, low-fidelity is quick. It also, when you're talking about user interface, has got a lot less risk."

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