Workshops Work:
Requirements Workshops Yield Business Value *and* Healthy Teams

BY ELLEN GOTTESDIENER, PRINCIPAL CONSULTANT, EBG CONSULTING

Get the right requirements, quickly. Rethink your requirements assumptions to help the business operate smarter. Build effective collaborative teams. Sound good? These are the compelling benefits of requirements workshops.

I recently planned and facilitated a series of requirements workshops to elicit and reach closure on requirements for a web-based technology-enabled system (TES) project to handle millions of dollars in transactions each month. The new software, intended to replace a rat's nest of manual and automated processes, needed to interface with multiple internal and external software applications.

Over five weeks, we:
- *Scoped* the requirements, delivering a context diagram, requirements in/out of scope table, stakeholder categories, policy groups, and a glossary
- Generated *high-level* requirements—use cases, actors, and a data model
- Built *detailed* requirements—atomic business rules, prototype screens, a state diagram, and scenarios

These deliverables defined user requirements for a specification used to take bids from external vendors.

The results? The application is rolling out across customer groups based on our use cases. Test cases and scripts for each release have been created from our use cases, scenarios, and business rules. IT and business participants are communicating their mutual needs more clearly.

What's more, the organization has decided that requirements workshops are a must for any significant enhancement or new development. You could say this: repetition is the sincerest form of flattery.

Getting the Right Requirements, Fast

What do the team members think about the process? At the end of the scoping workshop, I facilitated a retrospective, a session to enable teams to document their learning.

The team members discussed how tough the process was—how much mental effort it required—and their amazement at how much information and clarity they had gained in a short time. It was easy to see—the walls were covered with posters, diagrams, and sticky notes. Our recorder had captured and organized all this using soft tools.

"I want to say something," Jane said. One of the key business participants, Jane reported to Maria, the unit supervisor. Maria was also a subject matter expert and had decision-making authority about the requirements. "Maria resisted making the time to do these workshops—you know, taking five hours out of each day," Jane went on. "If she had her way, she'd do it the usual way, and that ends up never getting us what we need."

"What's 'the usual way'?" I asked.

"She would usually do this with the IT people." Jane glanced, half smiling, at Maria and then at the IT lead. "She'd say, 'You build something, show it to me, and I'll tell you what's wrong with it!'" Everyone, including Maria, laughed.

"So, Maria, what do you think about defining requirements this way?" I asked.

"Oh, this was really hard," Maria said. "But now I can see it is necessary. It has actually made me rethink some of the things I thought we needed, and some of the priorities."

Everyone nodded.

"Actually, it has saved me time and effort," she added. "It used to take weeks or months, going back and forth with IT, for them to figure out what we needed."

Requirements workshops are hard work, but they're worth the effort. As I explained in *Requirements by Collaboration,* workshops are a cost-effective, critical technique for reducing project risk.

Rethinking Your Business to Work Smarter

Our high-level workshops produced requirements representations that helped us understand the system's functionality and interfaces, including the needed data. I then planned the most detailed and challenging workshops—those to define atomic business rules (precise, formal statements of a single discrete business rule).

The input to these workshops included:
- Scenarios from prior workshops and pre-work with additional scenario details produced by the business participants
- Screen prototypes and logical data model produced by IT
- Business rule templates (I had designed these based on what I learned in the workshops about the company's rules)

Each of the four workshops took four to five hours. Between sessions, I worked with the recorder and Business Analyst to "clean up" the rules, ensuring they were atomic, consistent with other rules, and traced to each other, and to the use cases. In the workshop we reviewed the cleaned-up rules before tackling new scenarios and prototype screens.

It quickly became clear that the business rules were overly complicated. They were confusing, not only for internal business staff but also for customers, who were constantly calling with questions about payments, invoices, reconciliations, and more.

After the first workshop, Maria proposed to Meyer, the business sponsor, that the company simplify its business rules. She walked him through several pages of atomic rules we had created, all of them applying to only one scenario. Meyer was both appalled and intrigued. After research on costs (none) and customer reaction (enthusiastic), the simplification was approved.

Build Collaborative Teams

Requirements workshops also go a long way toward establishing and sustaining healthy teamwork between business and IT project members.

"We don't usually expect the IT people to figure out what we want," Maria explained. "But I like this approach. It's hard work, but I feel more confident that they understand our needs." Then she confessed, "Actually, I wasn't sure what I needed until we did these workshops!"

For its part, IT learned to not worry about technical solutions before understanding the business problem. During the final retrospective, we heard from Wayne, the manager of architecture and planning: "We have to focus on the implementation and interfaces, but I think this process helps us understand what you are trying to achieve."

The models built in the workshop had another benefit: helping the business people articulate their needs. One day Maria told us she was looking forward to the "Show and Tell," when project sponsors and stakeholders would be briefed by the participants. "I can't wait to show our sponsor that context diagram," she said (see photo above). "I'm gonna show him this and say to him, 'See why I am so busy and deserve a raise?'" ■

Ellen Gottesdiener, Principal Consultant, EBG Consulting, helps teams collaboratively explore requirements, shape their development processes, and plan their work, and she teaches business and IT people about requirements, facilitated workshops, retrospectives, and peer reviews. Her book Requirements by Collaboration: Workshops for Defining Needs *(Addison-Wesley, 2002) is reviewed in this issue of* the bridge. *Ellen is contributing author to* Scenarios, Stories, Use Cases Through the Systems Development Life-Cycle. *Her latest book is* Software Requirements Memory Jogger: A Pocket Guide to Help Software and Business Teams Develop and Manage Requirements *(Goal/QPC, 2005). She can be reached at ellen@ebgconsulting.com and http://www.ebgconsulting.com.*