

Requirements Specification – saying what you want

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If you don't know what you want, you have almost no chance of getting it. Words echoed down the centuries from philosophers such as Lucius Annæus Seneca who said "There is no fair wind for one who knows not whither he is bound." in the first century AD, and Forrest Gump: "If you don't know where you're going, you're unlikely to end up there." rather more recently.

Why bother with requirements?

Clearsight Consulting is regularly asked to help companies who have bought or commissioned a system that did not deliver the expected benefits or delivered nothing at all. When asked for the original specification that told the supplier what was required, it often turns out that there was no such document.

The moral is: when it comes to buying or commissioning IT systems, it's not enough to know what you want – it's just as important to be able to write it down so that your supplier understands what they have to deliver. It should come as no surprise that the failure to do this almost always leads to disappointment, if not disaster. According to the Standish Group (1995), the single most common cause of IT project failure was incomplete requirements, more than any of the usual suspects like poor planning, inadequate resources or lack of managerial support.

Gathering requirements can be omitted or skimped in projects because it takes time and effort. It has to take account of the views and needs of the various people who have a vested interest in the outcome, be that management, users, customers, suppliers, shareholders, regulatory bodies or any other of the many possible stakeholders. Investing this time and effort lays the foundations for a successful project though, since good requirements provide:

- a description of the agreed outcomes for the project
- a baseline for the project, against which a project manager can measure progress
- a basis for testing the systems in the project, and for accepting them into service when complete

How to say what you want

1. Succinctly state what you are trying to achieve.
For example, your aim may be "to improve customer satisfaction by 10%" or "to remove the use of paper from the office, except where it is useful or legally required for paper to be used".
2. Work out who should have a say in what's needed.
Users of the system are almost always candidates as stakeholders, not least because they know how things actually work in the organisation. Or, if your users are web site customers, because they will vote with their keyboard and go elsewhere if you don't meet their needs.
3. Consult the stakeholders and capture their requirements.

There are many ways to do this, including interviews, workshops, questionnaires, observation of current working practices and focus groups. In some situations, it may not be possible to speak to users (e.g. for a new web site), in which case, it is important to put yourself in the user's place and ask what they are trying to achieve and how you can help them to do that.

4. Capture other requirements

There will be other valuable sources of requirements as well as people. For example, it is useful to review problems reported with an existing system or manual processes. Trying out a competitor's website can identify problems to avoid and suggest better ways to serve the customer.

5. Check your requirements

Good requirements are best found by consistently asking stakeholders "**why?**", not taking their statements at face value but probing to discover the underlying need. Good requirements also concentrate on **what** is required, not on **how** that can be achieved. Finally, good requirements are as unambiguous as possible – explain what you mean, give examples, draw diagrams or process flows – anything that helps the supplier understand what you want.

6. Prioritise your requirements

Just because someone asks for something doesn't mean you need it or can afford it. Once you have all the requirements documented, set a priority for each (or each group).

7. Identify your assumptions and constraints

It is always worth being explicit about what you have assumed, for example, about your product or business, about how things may change in future, about your competition, or about the regulatory or legal context. It is also worth being explicit about your constraints, even if you do not divulge these initially to suppliers: what is your budget? what resource can you commit to the project? when must it be delivered?

8. Create your requirements specification

This step is about putting it all together, setting the context for what you are doing, describing the changes you want as a result of the project, setting your priorities and being clear about your assumptions. When you have refined and prioritised the requirements, have some of your stakeholders review them to make sure you have captured their needs. With an agreed specification in hand, you are much more likely to make a success of your project.

The bottom line

To have any chance of delivering a successful IT project: before starting out, make sure you have agreement on what people want from it and write it down.

Further information

You can find more detailed help on [getting the most from IT](#) from the Business Link site.

Clearsight Consulting helps businesses to invest wisely in technology through their [Buying IT service](#).