Gathering Business Requirements: Reality Check
By Richard Kuper

Is it important to gather requirements?
Let's start with the basic question: Is it important to gather Business Requirements? The obvious answer, of course, is yes. It is even more important to gather accurate and complete requirements. According to various studies conducted by the Standish Group, incomplete requirements and constantly changing requirements, along with unrealistic user expectations and lack of user involvement are among the top causes of project failures.

Can anybody gather requirements?
This article is being written in a down economy. Projects and budgets have been cut. People have been reallocated or let go. The projects that must proceed have fewer allocated resources, and attempts have been made to have those that are left wear multiple hats. By itself, having individuals wear multiple hats is not necessarily a bad thing. It depends on the individuals and the hats they are asked to wear.

Let's talk about who should wear the 'Requirements Gatherer' hat. This is the person who will most likely function with a title of some sort of Analyst. What will this person need to do and what kind of skills must this person have?

This person will need to meet with the Business folks (the User) to understand their business and to determine what they require. The Analyst will need to be able to communicate in language the Business understands, and also understand the language the Business speaks. I am not talking here about English or Spanish or Japanese or such. I am talking about being able to understand the business needs and being able to restate them in writing so the business can verify that the Analyst understands their needs. Such an Analyst is usually referred to as a Business Analyst. However, in a slow economy, the person with this skill set is probably among those who were cut, because Management did not understand the vital role they played. So this task may either fall on the Project Manager or on the Programmer.

The Project Manager's job is to manage the project and its resources. Since gathering requirements is a time consuming and detailed process, requiring the Project Manager to also be the Business Analyst seriously diverts the Project Manager from his or her primary duties. Making the Project Manager also be the Business Analyst would therefore not appear to be a very good idea, even if he or she has the required skill set. (The same would be true for trying to make the Project Manager also function as a Programmer.)

The Programmer is a technician. Most programmers that I know, and I know quite a few, would prefer never to have to talk to the User. They just want to have someone hand them the requirements and then be left alone to create a masterpiece of a program or system. Very few possess the skills necessary to truly understand the business needs and to translate them into clearly written requirements. Instead, they will more than likely only hear the parts that sound like new technology they can play with, and not hear what it is the Business truly needs. Making a Programmer also function as an Analyst, then, would appear to not be a very good idea. (The same would be true for trying to make the Analyst also function as a programmer.)

So, where does that leave us? It leaves us with the need for an Analyst whose job does not include managing the project or writing the code. It leaves us with the need for an Analyst who can accurately elicit requirements from the User and keep the User involved and informed throughout the project lifecycle. If the Analyst is also skilled at putting together testing methodology to ensure that the programs and systems that are created provide what is defined in the requirements, that is a bonus. In addition to documenting the Business/User Requirements, a highly skilled Analyst can create or assist in the development of other types of documentation, such as Functional Requirements, user guides, help guides and test scripts. A highly skilled Analyst may also be able to assist in the design phase of the project.

In conclusion:
Gathering and documenting requirements is a specialized skill and a needed one. Sadly, many businesses still do not understand that, even in a down economy, they need to gather complete and accurate requirements that meet the needs of the Users. To do so in any economic climate requires the dedicated skills of a good Analyst. Relegating such an important task to those who are either not skilled to do so or whose time should be spent on other important tasks, is a recipe for failure.

About the author:
Richard Kuper is founder and President of R.L. KUPER, Inc. and President & CEO of NY SPIN Inc. See his profile at http://www.linkedin.com/in/kuper.