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Perfecting the requirements management process

There's just no room for wastage these days. In a climate of job cuts, shrinking budgets and growing uncertainty, one area to look at is the effectiveness and efficiency of your existing processes. Gathering and managing product requirements is a critical process in most IT and Telecoms companies, with cost and time impacts across the entire business if requirements are wrong or are missed (see Fig.1). That is where requirements management software comes in. These applications claim to cut time to market, reduce errors and improve communication across an organisation. If true, this should be something product managers invest in, even when times are tough.

Essentially requirements management software provides a robust and scalable central database for collating, sorting, analysing and reporting on requirements. Such applications feature easy-to-use interfaces that encourage all stakeholders (including business users), to participate in the requirements process, improving collaboration across the business.

One of the biggest and most established products in this area is Telelogic DOORS which is now owned by IBM. Andy Gurd, Senior Product Marketing Manager at IBM Rational Software says: "Requirements management software implemented with your business process helps organisations to *do things right*. Reducing costs by being more efficient, making fewer mistakes and ensuring the product is built to specification is important at any time and particularly now given the current market conditions."

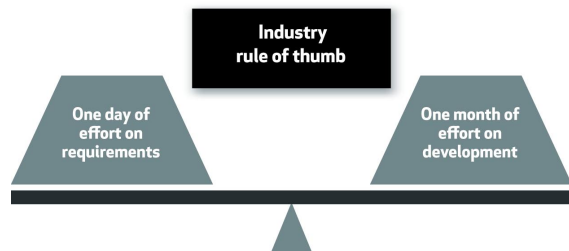


Fig.1 Why getting requirements right is critical

TOOLS

Jama Software Easier to deploy

Some of the latest requirements management products like Jama Contour are purely web-based, which means there is no client software to install on the desktop and users can access it from a browser. This makes them fast, easy and cheap to deploy. Many are also available as internet-hosted services that customers can rent; the Software as a Service (SaaS) model.

"Jama Contour is a pure web-based application that's designed to increase collaboration, manage complexity and fuel product innovation without the traditional overhead of big enterprise desktop software," says Emily Cox of Jama Europe. "Jama Contour costs from as little as £600 per user per year."

One of the key tasks that will always require a product manager's guiding hand is the prioritisation of different requirements. Although these applications can help manage the process, at the end of the day someone still has to decide which requirements to keep and which ones to drop.

"It's not sufficient just to *do things right*," says Andy Gurd, "you must also ensure you are *doing the right things*. Here we are talking about making sure you are investing in implementing the right requirements - those that will give you the best return on your investment." To help,

additional applications (such as IBM's Telelogic Focal Point) provide a tool to assist with the business decisions of what to build.

An average DOORS deployment costs tens of thousands of pounds.

On top of that an organisation has to consider the deployment costs across the organisation and training necessary to get everyone using it. We've heard it described as the Rolls-Royce of requirements management software, something you would use to manage all the requirements of a long-term, highly complex, engineering project like building a submarine or jumbo jet.

However there are also

smaller organisations that use the product and many Telecoms companies, including equipment manufacturers and service providers.

In May 2008, another supplier called Jama Software, in partnership with Ravenflow, did some research into requirements and collected data from more than 200 participants across various industries, with

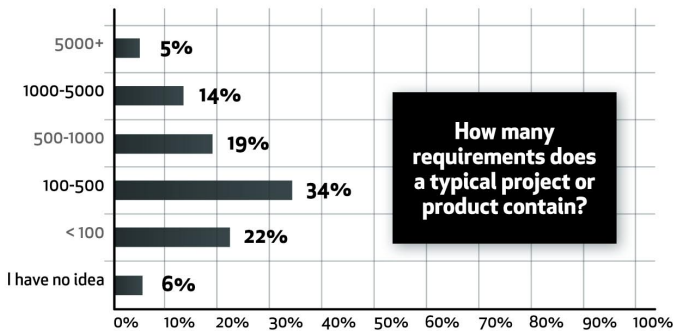


Fig.2 Estimating the number of requirements (Jama Research)

the largest proportion coming from the technology/software sector. They found that over a third of projects had more than 500 requirements, and 5% had over 5000! Though you might justifiably argue there is no such thing as a standard requirement the study illustrates the complexity many product managers have to deal with. The survey also revealed that 31% of product managers spend more than a quarter of their time dealing with requirement changes.

Considering the obvious complexity of managing requirements on many projects, an amazing 83% of product managers still rely upon Excel spreadsheets and Word documents.

Conclusion

There are a great number of requirements management software tools on the market, with a variety of price tags. Some are aimed at product management and others at the engineering/development department. If you're building a major product, then requirements management software definitely has its place.

For the vast majority of smaller products the ubiquitous spreadsheet and Word document are hard to beat. But these are only the tools. What's critical is the quality of the requirements management process that is used to populate these documents.

In our view, one of the biggest benefits of implementing requirements management software is that it forces you to review how you gather, prioritise and track requirements. Streamlining this process and avoiding costly mistakes is important at any time, but especially in the current economic climate.

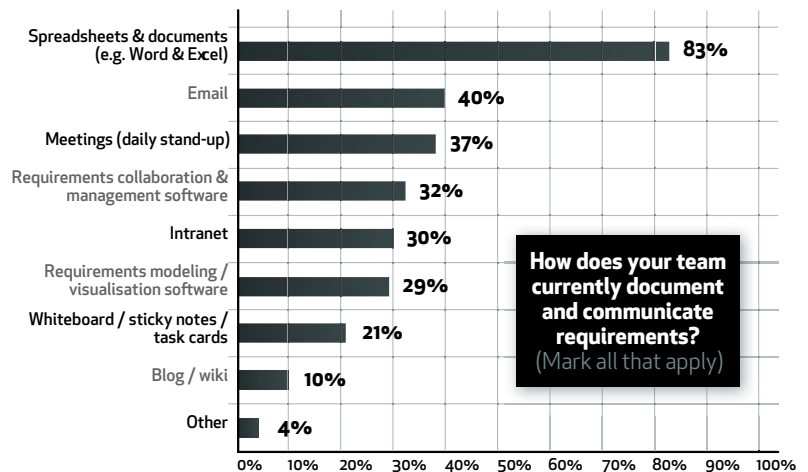


Fig.3 Managing requirements (Jama Research)

When to use requirements software

There are symptoms that might suggest your business will benefit.

- Product requirements can't all be handled by a single product manager
- The team is spread across several locations and/or time zones
- You have several hundred requirements or more
- The requirements are changing regularly