

Stakeholder engagement in a globally distributed software project

Project type: IT

Location: Global (North Africa, South Africa, Australia)

RICS/APM stakeholder principles: Consult early, and often; Remember, they're only human; Relationships are key

Stakeholder terms: Stakeholder analysis, stakeholder expectations, communication

Abstract

An international project to deliver a software product was challenged by numerous stakeholder issues. By focusing on effective stakeholder communications, on an international scale and using multiple media, the team turned around the problems and delivered a successful conclusion to the project.

Background

Software project with global, virtual team whose goal was to install software and computer tablets on equipment at an industrial site to monitor operational activities:

- Client site in northern Africa
- Software engineers in South Africa
- Project manager and electrical engineer in Australia

The issues

- Vague, highly text-based software design documents contributed to unrealistic stakeholder expectations
- Stakeholder requirements kept changing due to staff turnover (new agendas and expectations)
- Time zone differences
- Language barriers
- Logistics

The challenges

- Revise and agree stakeholder expectations
- Mitigate issues caused by virtual, international project
- Find effective channels of communication
- Ensure stakeholders are communicating effectively

The solution

Narrative as to how the issues were sorted, use numbering and letter convention to refer back to.

Stakeholder expectations were revised and agreed by:

- Live demonstrations of a demo system of the software
- Early reviews of the configured software prior to implementation
- Weekly conference calls to give a progress update, discuss any issues arisen, and keep project members on track. These were conducted using whichever technology was working well at the time: Skype, telephone, GoToMeeting. If the client site was without utilities, the meeting was rescheduled for the earliest possible date.
- Regular status reports (sent via email). It helped to send these before the weekly conference calls.

Changing stakeholder requirements were managed by:

- Having a clear contract that outlined the scope of the project and a process for handling change requests.
- Any new stakeholder that came on board the project was required to sign a document describing the requested changes and their effect on the time, cost and scope of the overall project. This ensured the client understood the consequences of their requests and the vendor was not penalised for exceeding previously agreed targets.
- A regular reiteration of the stakeholder identification and analysis activities over the life of the project would allow the project team to identify changes to stakeholder requirements as soon as possible. Actions could be taken to mitigate any detrimental effects to the project and also try to adapt to meet new requirements.

Issues caused by the virtual, international project team were mitigated as follows:

- Time zone differences were mitigated by vigorous planning of activities to ensure that each team had the information and tools required to carry out their assigned task within their working hours. Meetings were scheduled during time zone overlaps, and the project manager was allowed a flexible work schedule to be able to spend more time working within the project team's time zone.
- Language barriers were mitigated by having a site liaison who spoke the local language and acted as a translator. A train-the-trainer approach was used to teach users how to operate the software.
- Logistics was dealt with in two ways. The first was to research and plan far ahead for the complicated journeys to the client site. The other was to utilise all remote communications methods possible to minimise the need to travel to site.

To find effective channels of communication, two things needed to be considered:

- First, determine what technology was available to both the client and vendor. Usually the telephone did not work, so all kinds of social media were tried, from Skype, online meeting software, email to Facebook chats/wall posts.
- Second, that the method matched the type of communication trying to be achieved.

Ensuring that stakeholders communicated effectively was dealt with by:

- Meeting face-to-face with the project team, client team and project manager at the start of the project. This established a rapport and trust that would take much longer to create using solely electronic communication.
- Establishing regular contact, such as weekly meetings.

- Ensuring that all stakeholders understood commonly used terms specific to the project, such as UAT (User Acceptance Test), Configuration Analysis, etc.
- Ensuring that roles and responsibilities were clearly outlined, so that reporting lines were followed.

The benefits

The project was signed off as successfully delivered in the end, which means that the client side stakeholders considered their requirements met and the vendor project team had been appropriately coordinated to deliver the required software.

The learning points

Global, virtual projects require rigorous planning and extra attention to detail to ensure project stakeholders (internal and external) always have the appropriate information and tools to carry out their tasks.

Uncommon ways of communicating can and should be utilised, as long as a record of all discussions and decisions is kept and distributed to stakeholders in a timely fashion.

This case study was written by the APM Stakeholder Engagement Focus Group.

- *For more information on the group or stakeholder engagement, [click here](#).*