Requirements by Collaboration: Workshops for Defining Needs
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Requirements by Collaboration: Workshops for Defining Needs by Ellen Gottesdiener Addison-Wesley, Boston, 2000, ISBN 0201786060 Reviewed by Eileen Dowse.

Software has become a critical component of our everyday lives. You don't have to go far to find it incorporated in something you use regularly. Cars, gas pumps, microwave ovens, banking machines and, the most obvious, computers all use software to perform their tasks and meet your needs. The design of software and the identification of the requirements for user expectations, legal standards and functionality are critical to the success or failure of a project. The destiny of poorly defined software requirements is failure.

Requirements by Collaboration is a valuable and practical book for people who facilitate workshops where people come together to strategize and create essential user requirements for software engineering project deliverables. Ellen Gottesdiener is President of EBG Consulting Inc., a firm providing facilitation, consulting and training services to clients. She is the author of numerous articles and several book contributions.

As a pioneer of Requirements Workshops, Gottesdiener notes the biggest problem in software organizations is the communication between software people and business people. Facilitation helps tap into the collective wisdom of all user groups, appreciating and legitimatising their concerns and increasing the probability of successful outcomes. Just as software must be engineered into the design of a product, collaboration must be engineered into the design of the Requirements Workshop. Collaboration is crucial in providing a wealth of well organized information to establish relationships, achieve mutual understanding and build trusting partnerships, all of which are critical in today's business operations. Gottesdiener views collaboration as a continuous loop, constantly affecting the quality of the outcome and the speed of the communication in product development.

This book gives you the tools for eliminating inefficient results, clarifying incorrect product design, and realigning the possibility of missed deliverables and developing personal accountability and credibility. This book is a wonderful exploration of facilitation concepts and methods and their effect on project outcomes. Not a new subject to be sure, but Gottesdiener presents this material in an in-depth way, incorporating theories, personal experience and additional resources to expand your knowledge base. She defines requirements as the needs or conditions that must be satisfied by users and suppliers. Requirements Workshops then, are facilitated group meetings tied to business requirements, user requirements and software requirements. These workshops incorporate the working styles of the people, languages, knowledge, regulations and services.

Gottesdiener shows how such workshops reduce the time it takes to gather requirements, increasing team productivity and reducing project risks in final product delivery. Gottesdiener describes three types of Requirements Workshops: 1. Charter—to create goals, objectives and a communication plan 2. Scope—to create case names, business terms and context diagrams 3. High-level—to create business rules, scenarios, and brief descriptions of use cases Each type of workshops requires structured meetings in order to define, create, refine and reach closure on deliverables. They require:

· a neutral facilitator
· a fair amount of pre-work
· information discovery creation
· participation from all members
· activities that promote innovation and teamwork
· deliverables of specific predefined products
· creation of draft models Book Reviews
· use of visual media

In her own words, "This book is about the two essential needs: efficiently defining user requirements and building positive, productive relationships." She believes the workshop purpose drives the workshop approach. Gottesdiener also explores roles and responsibilities within the workshop structure, especially the need for a workshop sponsor. The sponsor is the person with the authority and legitimacy to make the workshop happen. That person can be a software or business project manager, program sponsor or analyst, but never the facilitator.

Gottesdiener suggests that a facilitator is a diagnostician, taking a holistic approach to achieving an end result and a desired outcome. The facilitator helps the group establish a workable approach and safe environment for sharing knowledge and diverse perspectives to make decisions. "The facilitator is a process leader, influencing the flow of the group's work, maximizing participation and minimizing individual domination and interruption while guiding the group to closure. A facilitator is content neutral." Gottesdiener emphasizes that one of the most important facilitator skills is observing. Gottesdiener defines facilitation as "the art of leading people through processes towards agreed-upon objectives in a manner that encourages participation, ownership and productivity from all involved." She discusses the qualities and skill sets needed, including: · requirements model and requirements management

· software engineering
· system development methodologies, process, and techniques
· systems thinking
· group dynamics
· personality styles and human communication modes
· decision-making models and techniques
· ability to work with cultural differences of groups.

She makes reference to facilitators becoming IAF certified as a way ("but not a guarantee") of ensuring that a person has the necessary skills to facilitate good requirements workshops.

Gottesdiener brings credibility to the wide range of problems that can arise from this type of work, by devoting a chapter to case studies. She follows each with personal insights, learning points, best claims, and an understanding of what works best and what should not be repeated. She devotes other chapters to group dynamics, process and techniques, design strategies, visual models and the logistics of coordinating a meeting. The material is presented logically and illustrated with both theories and stories. The book is filled with interactive lists, cartoons and models, along with a repository of information including lots of tips, useful Web sites and further readings with brief summaries of recommended books.

After absorbing the lessons and insights this book provides, I would make it required reading for all facilitators. It is by far one of the best resources I've found and is probably one of the more useful and realistic books on requirement facilitation today. Analysts, project managers, developers, architects and testers will benefit from reading this book, as well as anyone else responsible for approving software requirements and deliverables.

This book is every bit as appropriate for individuals seeking to understand the concepts of facilitation as it is for veteran facilitators wanting to hone their group development and process skills. For the beginner this book provides new information, and for the more experienced facilitator it is excellent at jogging your memory about important fundamentals and tried and-true-facilitation techniques. If there's one thing you get from this book, it's knowing that the biggest issue in the 21st century isn't technology, it's the human factors.

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