

Customer Role in Agile projects – Barb Miller

Agile Requirements gathering requires a subject matter expert (SME) who has a vested interest in the success of the project team. The SME must be an integral member of the team, available to provide frequent information to the developers, while maintaining some of his/her current responsibilities, in order to make sure he/she still has a pulse on the ever-changing business area. The SME must be a well-respected knowledgeable member of the business community, who will be able to serve as an ambassador for the project when it's time to roll it out to the business.

The individual(s) chosen for this role must be knowledgeable about WHY they do what they currently do, as well as open to thinking about improvements to the current processes. He/she must be empowered to make decisions for his/her team, in order to facilitate progress. The person needs to be enthusiastic, a good communicator, evangelist, in short, a real all-star!

It's also important to limit the role of this SME to assist in gathering requirement, testing functionality, providing user training, etc, and NOT to design the system. They provide the "what"; the developers/architect provide the "how".

We've gotten ourselves into trouble when allowing the customer to design the system when they know a lot about what the current system does without understanding *why* they perform certain processes. For instance, our customer understood that the agent using the system needed to be "cleared". The customer "designed" a nightly process that duplicated licensing information to a table in our database, to be queried when the agent logged in. When we dug into the requirements, we discovered that we could simply use a remote stored procedure to confirm the eligibility of the agent at the time he/she logged in, using the "master" database, and never replicate the data and functionality of the "master" system.

In another case, a new customer (one who was unfamiliar with phase 1 of a system that was to be enhanced) took it upon herself to start with a blank slate. She designed a solution in a way that removed much of the flexibility that had been built into the first phase. We spent a lot of time pointing out the costs that would be incurred in 1) starting over and 2) building a system that would require substantially more developer involvement in customizing it for each client. By not keeping closer tabs on where this customer was going, we ended up causing damage to the relationship.