8 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE GATHERING PROJECT REQUIREMENTS

Taking time to get to know your stakeholders and identify your project's high-level business requirements—before you plan or build anything—can save a lot of headaches in the end. And questions are your friend when it comes to understanding exactly what needs to be done to ensure project success.

Just remember, not all stakeholders think like you do in terms of features, functionality, and time to build. In fact, it could be a big black box for them. It's your job to connect their business goals and requirements to the project.

Seize the opportunity by coming up with a core set of questions you can ask to uncover a project's essential requirements. You may not be able to take a cookie-cutter approach to every project, but having ready questions on hand can help you get the ball rolling in a pinch. (Hint: Check out this download for question ideas.)

Of course, before you dump a set of questions on your stakeholders, be sure you understand what you're asking and why. Start by asking yourself these questions first.

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1 WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION AM I LOOKING FOR?

Good question, right? Okay, maybe it seems high-level, but you need to have an eagle eye for the things that could turn into actual features or functions. That'll give you a clue about what's going to be in scope and where you might be able to set some clear boundaries. So if something looks unclear or just down-right ridiculous, earmark it so you can dig in further.

2 HOW WILL THIS INFORMATION HELP THE PROJECT AND MY TEAM?

Sometimes project requests are extremely detailed, and other times they're so high-level you can't get a sense of require-ments. Once you dig into the documents that are available to you, you'll know what you need to do (ask for more or analyze). But as you examine things, ask yourself this question, and use it as your wayfinding guide to help you build out your requirements.

DO ANY POTENTIAL SCOPE ISSUES STAND OUT?

3

Your requirements need to be within scope. If you're going through your docs and have a concern about scope, question it immediately. There's nothing worse than accepting a requirement or making an assumption about one, only to have it become a scope issue down the road. So think carefully about what can be done within the scope of the project before accepting what you see at face value.

WHERE IS THERE CONFUSION?

4

Along the same lines of the last couple of questions, you'll want to be 100% sure you're clear on the details—and even the details of the details! When it comes to requirements, you need to be confident you know what will be executed and that everyone agrees. If you see something that's even just a little off, don't be afraid to call it out.

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DO OUR PROJECT GOALS ALIGN WITH MY STAKEHOLDERS' BUSINESS?

Not just knowing—but fully understanding—your stakeholders' business goals and how your project maps to them will help you determine if you're fully covering your requirements.

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WILL THESE REQUIREMENTS HELP ME SET THE PROPER EXPECTATIONS?

At the end of the day, your requirements will help you manage the scope of your project. Without all the details documented, you won't be able to manage expectations properly. Think of this as your opportunity to make things easier down the road for your team and your project.

AM I ASKING THE RIGHT PEOPLE THESE QUESTIONS?

7

Once you've got your questions set and ready to ask, make sure you get the right people at the table. Beware the stakeholders who are hiding in the corners, just waiting to introduce new requirements. If you're not sure who should be part of the conversation, ask your point of contact to guide you in the right direction. Tell them this is your opportunity to discuss all project needs, and it will be difficult to manage new requests late in the project.

ANSWERS = DOCUMENTED REQUIREMENTS

8

If you're lucky, you'll have positive, easy answers to all of these questions. But chances are, you'll have to dig in on a few things. The good thing is, the answers to your questions will eventually turn into expected interactions, features, or functionalities that will help you begin your requirements documentation. So take notes, and maybe even consider jumping straight into a spreadsheet. Download our free Requirements Template for a quick head start.