Developing and Using Acceptance Criteria

Acceptance criteria are the conditions that a deliverable software, product or process change must meet to be accepted by a user. They are pre-established requirements that the end product must satisfy. They are also an important part of contractual agreements. Acceptance criteria are written from the user point of view and help you move from "it works as designed and coded" to "it works as intended".

Good acceptance criteria:

- Set the expectation level and document the point at which the client agrees the product is "done". If acceptance criteria are missing or inaccurate, a project may encounter missed financial and delivery date targets and not meet customer satisfaction.
- Know when to pay the contractor for a deliverable. In cases where the acceptance criteria are tied to payment, it should be relevant to the deliverables, pass or fail, and measurable.
- Avoid miscommunication and reduce risk. Clear acceptance criteria help you and the contractor determine when the work satisfies the goals of the project.
- Requires the team to work from the client or user perspective. Good acceptance criteria help developers build the right solution.

Well rounded acceptance criteria for deliverables in an engagement (those leading up to and including the software implementation or product delivery), include the following components:

- **A Deliverable Description.** This conveys the features and/or the functions that will be included in the project product. Each deliverable is an element of the project product, each with its own separate but interdependent deliverable scope.
- **Quantifiable Measures.** Acceptance Criteria are quantifiable measures of the success of each deliverable. It's how the executive sponsor and the project team know when a deliverable is acceptable and can be approved. Acceptance criteria are similar to measures of success except they are for a specific deliverable. The criteria are described above and the methodology and criteria should be published.
- **Standards for Content and Format.** These describe the format in which the sponsor can expect to receive the deliverable. This ensures that the deliverable will be usable to meet its objective upon delivery. The tools, techniques, and processes used to develop the deliverable must compliment the sponsor's environment and enable the sponsor to use the deliverable.
- **Opportunity for Quality Review.** This provides the opportunity for peer and cross-discipline reviews of the deliverable.
- **The Process for Deliverable Acceptance.** Describe the process that this project will use for the formal acceptance of all deliverables. Generally, a Deliverable

Acceptance Form is used with specific timeframes allowed for review, approval, rework, etc.

Good acceptance criteria are:

- Written as statements in clear, simple language, without ambiguity as to the expected outcome;
- Are relatively high level but provide enough detail to be useful;
- Have a clear pass or fail result (there is no partial acceptance) and state what is and is not acceptable;
- Specify functional, nonfunctional (quality), and performance criteria or requirements;
  o Functional criteria identify specific user tasks, functions or business processes.
  o Nonfunctional criteria identify non-functional conditions the implementation must meet, such as design elements.
  o Performance criteria, such as response time, should be included if it is critical to the acceptance of a deliverable.
  o Other factors might include usability, error handling and stress tests
- May be expressed as an input, process and outcome depending on the deliverable being evaluated (e.g. I want to register online to cut down on paperwork);
- Are written before development begins (criteria written after development tend to verify functionality built, not functionality needed to satisfy the user); and
- Are testable and easily translated into a manual or automated test (when software or product related).

Deliverable review, may include the following types of questions related to the acceptance criteria:

- Is it what was agreed upon?
- Is it feasible?
- Is it accurate?
- Does the solution fit in with your requirements?
- Does it meet your standards?
- Is the verbiage used appropriate and understandable?
- Is there undesirable impact on staff or resources?
- Is the artifact complete?

In some instances, your agency may have a format in which it prefers to see specific deliverables. In those cases, providing the deliverable template to the contractor, along with additional instructions on the depth and breadth of information expected, can help improve the acceptance of deliverables on the first pass.