

Acceptance testing as an agent of change

The importance of closely aligning IT with business objectives is indisputable and never more so than today in complex stakeholder environments where business change projects need to be justified with quick and tangible return on investment. However, many organisations still struggle to get this right with many businesses operating in information silos leading to duplication, poor productivity and ultimately poor customer service.

Acceptance, properly planned and executed, can be used to gain support and buy-in to change. It provides an excellent tool to make sure business change achieves the desired outcomes, enabling lasting business benefits to be achieved. Acceptance assures the quality and completeness of systems delivery and ensures that it matches agreed business requirements and meets reasonable user expectations. This is done by engaging with the users who will be impacted by the change right from the start at the requirements stage. The process provides consistent measurement throughout and then final sign off and implementation of the change into the live business environment.

However, it is essential to see Acceptance as not just about technology; it also includes transformational changes to end-to-end business processes, taking the business users with you using a strong communications programme.

So what can go wrong and what is the impact?

It all sounds like common sense, doesn't it? However issues can and do occur and these result in poor technical performance and functionality which will have fundamental impacts on the business.

Acceptance testing activities have often been framed in terms of systems and technology and not in terms that are meaningful to users so the impacts of change are not widely understood and hence there can be a wider lack of engagement.

In the past, senior managers may have been remote from the Acceptance process; however, the business landscape is now changing as these managers are increasingly accountable for the wider aspects of change such as the regulatory context and legal outcomes of failure.

On the systems development side, some organisations are adopting Agile methods to increase speed to market and ensure that the business gets what it needs from new IT developments by working in small mixed teams of developers, users and testers. However, believing that Agile on its own will be the answer is not enough.

Understanding requirements and proving how they will match outcomes is essential to avoid lots of change requests or re-work. If this isn't done the systems requirements will probably not match what the business believes it wants. It is important to understand that business and IT may have a different view on how critical different defects are. This means that both the business and IT will need to agree how defects should be ranked to be fixed in order to meet the priorities of the business as a whole.

If Acceptance testing isn't managed properly, the planned test coverage is generally larger than it needs to be and so can be inefficient and repetitive. Sometimes this is because the results of previous stages are not trusted or understood, or there isn't a holistic view of the testing that takes place across the whole change delivery.

In these situations, issues will usually not become apparent until User Acceptance Testing, close to the end of the change delivery when the outcomes are not what was expected and it will then either be too late or expensive to fix! It is worth remembering that requirements-based defects are often the largest class

of defects found during User Acceptance Testing (in our experience, around 60%, reinforced by Gartner's view at over 50%).

This is also substantiated by research we have conducted with IDC. In Figure 1 the yellow curve shows how defects are often found late in the lifecycle when the cost and complexity associated with correcting them is greatest, but the release date cannot be compromised. At this point the response of the majority of organisations is to throw more resources (and cost) at the problem, or to de-scope some of the functionality of the system in order to keep to the planned timescale.

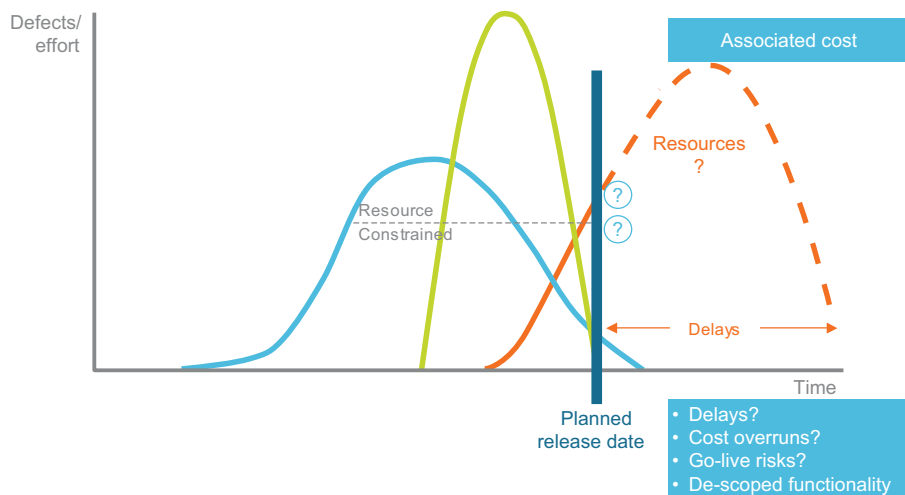


Figure 1

So how can you optimise Acceptance and make it a powerful tool?

Acceptance needs to be used strategically and holistically to help IT and the business deliver change efficiently while controlling risk. In order to achieve the ideal testing bell curve (blue curve in Figure 1) we at Capita believe that the process of Acceptance needs to be transparent and meaningful to those who have to sign off any change as fit for production and especially for those who would have to live with the consequences if the change fails. It is therefore essential that one capitalises on domain knowledge to ensure that business requirements are properly identified and risks are understood.

It is clear that not all requirements will have equal impact on the business as a whole. Typically a proportion of around 20% of the requirements will carry around 80% of the risk in the delivered system measured against a range of factors such as reputation, frequency of use, newness, and complexity. As part of the Acceptance process these risks need to be identified and articulated to allow better delivery management and ensure that outcomes are optimised to make the most positive impacts.

This means that managers can easily frame their go-live decisions in terms of risk management. They are able to understand what has and has not been tested; what was found through testing and what the business consequences will be in different scenarios. Testing should be carried out in a joined up fashion to drive out realistic scenarios that could develop into future problems.

Business process testing helps to clarify requirements and drives out implicit requirements. However, it isn't enough only to review individual business processes end-to-end; it is essential to make sure that wider functions such as compliance, marketing and legal are impacted throughout. Nor is it only about functionality.

Understanding the technical requirements and how a system will be used whilst ensuring that it will be able to technically function as expected and required will be equally important.

Clear processes that support early intervention at requirements stage drives out defects early in the lifecycle. It also becomes less expensive and more effective in terms of the timeliness and predictability of the solution. If requirements are properly identified right up front with users first time around, volatility is reduced throughout the delivery and the user base is engaged from early in the delivery rather than simply a bit at the beginning and a lot at the end.

Where we work in this way Capita sees a widely engaged, informed business community and a higher quality of solution which is measured by delivering what the users wanted. While it is essential to use business terms that are understandable by staff at all levels, those signing off at the executive level are able to do so from a position of being informed, clearly demonstrating management control internally, to audit and crucially to regulatory bodies.

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