

Client Expectations In IT Projects

An old joke among IT professionals revolves around a client requiring a specific application software. The final deliverable arrives after months of hard work involving needs assessments, specifications, demos and software development. The client reviews the software, willfully congratulates all the parties involved and quickly certifies that "...although this is exactly what he had asked for, it is not what he really wanted...". So it is back to square one.

This broadly defines the issue of meeting client expectations, which is a basic ingredient of a typical open-ended IT project. In the case of internally developed software where the product is designed and developed by full time client staff, project costs, accountability, milestones and deadlines quickly become irrelevant. But the situation is far more serious in the case of externally developed software where the product is developed by a software house under a fixed price contract. In the absence of proper financial compensation, missed deadlines and extended timescales as a result of not meeting client expectations could even threaten the financial viability of the developer. To reduce the effects of this issue, the availability of the following is necessary, as a minimum:

- A fair priced contract balancing the rights and obligations of all parties.
- A detailed set of technical and functional specifications and a list of clearly specified deliverables pre-approved by the client.
- Reasonable project milestones with measurable progress quantifiers.
- A mechanism for resolving financial issues resulting from extended timescales in fixed price contracts.

From an IT literacy perspective, issues related to client expectations can be seen in both private and public sector projects. The probability is high in projects for *illiterate* clients and it becomes even higher in projects related to *semi-literate* clients where the client unilaterally gives himself the right to assume multiple and in most cases conflicting roles.