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HSG CONSULTING, LLC
Providing Quality and Experienced Project Management Methods

Welcome to the September newsletter for HSG Consulting

Welcome to the September newsletter. Occasionally I run across some great project management tools or ideas that I'd like to share with you. Somewhere between a blog and formal article, this is meant to be conversational, helpful, and inspire feedback. I hope you enjoy it.

Click to visit my website

In This Issue
- 3 Steps to Better User Stories
- Who is HSG Consulting?
- User Story Samples

3 Steps to Better User Stories

DOCTOR FUN | Oct 2002

I THINK I'D RATHER MANAGE A LARGE SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT.

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http://ibiblio.org/Dave/drfun.html

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The daydreams of cat herders

Ok, this cartoon really tickled my funny bone and I just had to share it with you. Being a project manager has often been referred to as herding cats. This gives us an altogether different perspective!

Lets talk about user stories. Writing and appropriately sizing user stories is one of the first and continuing challenges for organizations adopting an Agile methodology. While similar to requirements in characteristics, user stories require some special attention to get optimal results. Below is an example of a user story layout.

Keep these three steps in mind for your user stories:

1. **SSMART**
2. **User Centric**
3. **Independent**

1. SSMART

No, that's not a typo. Like your goals, user stories should follow the same principles, plus one, Simple;

S - Simple. The user story should be a simple item of work, not a complex series of activities. This is the heart of breaking a complex piece of work down into a number of simpler pieces that can be accomplished within the chosen iteration length. For example, a user story of 'write and send next eZine article.' is too vague, non specific, and feels complex due to its lack of specificity and simplicity.

S - Specific. Your user story should be specific about what is to be done. An example is: 'Write up 2nd eZine article, format it using same template as 1st article, and ready it for distribution by selecting a target mailing list.' This describes what is to be done, and provides enough information to begin work on the task. Note how this also defines *done* for the user story.

M - Measurable. Once you've written the user story, be sure your project team estimates the effort. Whether you use story points, hours, or some other estimation value, the act of estimating the user story will help vet the SSMART items and begin to open the discussion within the team about the scope and intent of the work.

A - Attainable. Ok, we have to actually be able to accomplish the task involved in the user story. By doing this we also support the definition of done. So writing a user story of 'Achieve world peace' is a worthy goal, but not very attainable for most project teams.

R - Realistic. Like being able to accomplish the user story, it needs to be achievable by your project team. Setting a user story that is far out of their reach will not foster success. There is more that can be said of exploratory user stories, and how to treat them and use them within a project. However, the bulk of a project's user stories should be realistic and achievable by the project team.

T - Timely. The user story should be achievable within the iteration time frame, and have a time frame associated with it. This supports the Measurable aspect of the SSMART principle.

2. USER CENTRIC

User Stories are written from the user's point of view and tell the story of what is to be completed. While this sounds obvious, it remains a difficult area for companies transitioning from *Waterfall* to *Agile*. A key concept for the project team is to clearly define *WHO* the primary user of the site is. If you design for everyone, it will be usable by no one. You can get a quick overview of persona's on Wikipedia, which will reference much of Alan Cooper's work . An example of a user-centric story aimed at the primary persona for the site is: 'Jane Doe can upload her resume to the website, as well as provide up to 3 meta-tags for searching and up to 3 external links.'

3. INDEPENDENT

Often overlooked, the success of Agile user stories is the ability to replan and reschedule the user stories as business needs change. Each user story should be as independent as possible to avoid entire blocks of user stories that must be completed together. This is one of the hallmarks of Agile, and one of the pieces that teams struggle with as they try to simplify and break down a complex task into multiple pieces.

Think broadly here, and consider using techniques like stubbing out database connections so a user story that depends on a database being created can still be completed independent of the database, and integrated later when the underlying structures are set up.

Click for Wikipedia reference on Persona's

Who is HSG Consulting?

My clients come to me when they're frustrated about missed project deadlines, creeping scope and hidden agendas cropping up in their projects. They say my techniques help them refocus their teams and regain direction of their projects. I don't suppose you experience any of these issues with your projects, but if you do, give me a call or drop me a line and let's talk about how I could help your company.

Click to access my 'Contact Us' page

User Story Samples

Following are some sample user stories that I've used as a Project Manager that help illustrate some of the points in the article. Notice the green status dot showing that task has been completed.

1   Interview Project Sponsor   2 hrs

Get background of project, stakeholders
defined; initial scope & timeline ; measure
of success; risks; deliverables & possible
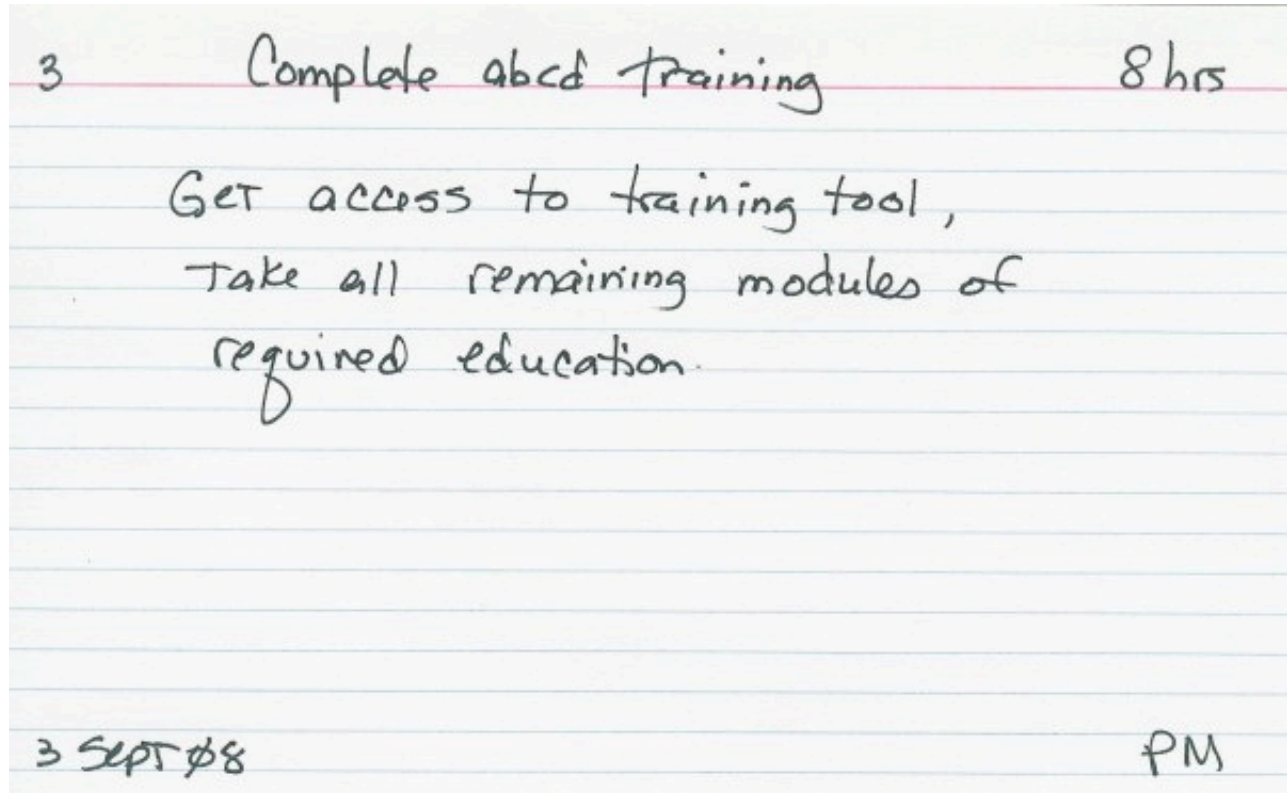Participants

2 Sept 08   PM

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2   Complete 2 modules of abcd   4 hrs
        Process training

Get access to training tool & take
2 modules of required training

2 Sept 08   PM

Less is more - Agile Project Management presented in this month's PMI magazine from Suncorp in Brisbane Australia. Click here to access the *September* issue, click on 'Contents' in the top navigation bar to see the table of contents, then select 'From The Top' under viewpoints on page 25.

The *September* issue also has an article for **Start Ups** and why you may need to focus on Project Management for success of your small business.

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