



Specsavers has a clear eye for analysis standards

SPECSAVERS RETAIL SYSTEMS

The introduction of standardised business analysis processes and artefacts allows Specsavers Retail Systems to structure and manage its business rules, system requirements and analysis resources.

As an element in its strategic growth plan and broadening IT base, Specsavers Retail Systems understands the importance of high quality business analysis and is putting in place a comprehensive set of processes, standards and tools to support it, along with a certification standard to ensure quality.

Specsavers Group

Specsavers was founded in 1984 and has grown rapidly to become the market leader in eye-care in the UK, covering both spectacles and contact lenses. The company continues to expand – it employs over 500 staff at its headquarters in Guernsey and the company has more than 700 stores across Europe. It has also successfully entered the hearing-aid market with its Hearcare brand.

The Challenge

The growth has in a large part been due to its highly flexible business model which is supported by an increasingly complex portfolio of systems. Managing changes to the business processes and adapting and expanding the software systems to suit have been key elements of the success to date. However, the strategic understanding of how the business rules are supported by the systems has resided in the heads of a core team of people – the Knowledge Team (or K-Team). In order to continue to scale two things were needed – (i) a means of documenting and modelling that knowledge for induction purposes and impact analysis, (ii) a standard for business analysts working on new development projects that allowed the K-Team to review, critique and incorporate into the wider knowledge base.

Peter Robinson, Business Analyst Manager for Specsavers Retail Systems puts it this way:

“We’d relied to date on the K-Team to ensure business consistency across the board, but we knew we needed to harvest that knowledge into a standardised form to scale and avoid bottlenecks and communication problems.”

“We also wanted to improve the efficiency of the business analysis process and the flexibility of analyst resourcing. I need to be able to move analysts between projects and get them operational as quickly as possible.”

In order to improve IT responsiveness Specsavers have adopted agile development processes. This also provided a good opportunity to take a look more broadly at the efficiency and effectiveness of their internal processes and organisation.

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PETER ROBINSON,
BUSINESS ANALYST MANAGER,
SPECSAVERS RETAIL SYSTEMS

“It seemed the right time to formalise our processes across the board”, Robinson explains.

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In addition to the need for internal knowledge harvesting and process standardisation, Specsavers Retail Systems was using an increasing number of external contract staff to bridge peaks in project resource requirements and to support flexible growth in the portfolio development programme. These contract staff came with a mixture of approaches to business analysis and because of programme growth could quickly become key knowledge holders in their specific areas.

“We needed a way to standardise all the different working practices” adds Robinson.

“We wanted to have a common language for business analysis and to ensure that best practice was followed by everyone”.

Additionally, due to the nature of contracts, it was important for the contract analyst knowledge to be captured in a standardised form before the contract expired.

“We needed to protect the business from the risk of dependencies on individual analysts by capturing knowledge as part of the day-to-day process. Knowledge capture was an essential aspect of the analysis process.”

The Strata Software Solution

As a general policy, Specsavers adopts open standards wherever possible and the process area was no exception – whatever solution was chosen had to be proven and already working elsewhere. The origin of the process in the UML Components¹ approach was further evidence of its maturity.

Robinson explains further, “We wanted a solution that was based on experience not just theory. We also wanted something relatively simple. We had looked at some of the alternative approaches and found them too heavy for our organisation, and too complex to adapt and configure. The Strata Software solution seemed to fit well with our requirements. It was proven, based on best practice, and readily open to customisation.”

Georgios Ntinolazos, business analyst and mentor for Strata Software, handled the process adoption for Specsavers. He says, “The Specsavers team were very clear they were looking for a lightweight process that dovetailed with their agile development and change management methodology. We also needed to be able to configure the process artefacts to the current tool choices without being locked-in to any particular vendor.”

To facilitate incremental adoption and to avoid disrupting critical in-flight projects, the processes and standards were established in stages, starting with one business area and then fanning out to others. Ntinolazos was initially focused on the clinical dispensing area. He then branched into other areas, spreading the standardisation and communication.

“We started small and grew from there”, he explained. “We formalised the analysis artefacts in one business area and used these to train and mentor analysts and the K-Team in other areas and on other projects. This allowed everyone to move to the new standards at their own pace.”

There was also the issue of automation support. Specsavers Retail Systems had selected MagicDraw as their modelling tool. Strata Software mentors worked with MagicDraw to create a business analyst framework – a set of product-specific standards and profiles to use when applying the process.

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BUSINESS ANALYST MENTOR,
STRATA SOFTWARE

¹UML Components – ISBN: 0-201-70851-5

Liz Cooper, one of the business process mentors for Strata Software, pointed out, "Since the process standards are based on standard UML² extensions, customising them for most UML tools is straightforward and MagicDraw was no exception. We also created a user guide to help analysts who were less familiar with UML tools in general."

Once the process was established and being successfully used on projects Specsavers decided to consolidate the project experiences into an internal certification standard. This supports the internal analyst training and assessment programmes and is a useful benchmark in the recruitment of temporary and permanent staff.

Cooper worked on developing the certification standard and associated tests. "We built in to the certification the fact that there were two principal users of the artefacts – those who created and managed the artefacts, and those, typically more on the business side, who would review the models and business rules for correctness."

This separation was a useful profiling technique and could then be used for balancing different skill sets across projects.

Robinson concludes, "We are very happy with progress and adoption to date. The analysts have had to go through a learning curve, but the benefits of standardisation are starting to take effect with improved communication and earlier identification of inconsistencies. We also have a knowledge capture approach in place to protect the business from dependency on individuals. The next step is to roll the process out more widely and to introduce a more structured internal training regime."

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Strata Software provides customised business-IT alignment solutions to end-customers through consulting, mentoring, training, and standardised best practice.

We also build partnerships with systems integrators, solution providers, and technology, tools and package companies to strengthen our ability to meet customer business needs.



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²UML – Unified Modeling Language (www.uml.org)