

Beta-Rubicon Contract Profile: Private Company - Software Specification and Development Oversight

Beta-Rubicon worked with a start-up company to develop a commercial software product for assisting attorneys in jury selection. The software was to be an expert system based upon data generated from research into the jury selection process by one of the company principals - a unique approach. The company approached Beta-Rubicon with a concept, a rough list of needed features, and a crude prototype of the software system.

Beta-Rubicon's first step was to perform a technology assessment to determine the best approach for development and market entry. Beta-Rubicon assisted the client in applying for a state grant that partially supported the assessment. Beta-Rubicon also introduced the client to a local technology incubator, which assisted the client with management and funding in the development phase. The assessment was completed in two weeks, and two primary recommendations (among several) were made: the client should develop a functional specification for the software before contracting the actual implementation (i.e. coding) and the current firm that the client was considering for implementation did not appear to be competent to handle the required work.

The client then requested that Beta-Rubicon assist in preparing a full set of functional specifications for the software. Beta-Rubicon worked closely with the client for a period of six weeks to develop the final specifications document. This document provided detailed documentation of every aspect of the software development: interface, data, functionality, and verification procedures. In addition to the text of the document, two rapid prototypes for the program interface were developed in Visual Basic and several mockups of reports and charts were prepared for client review.

The technology incubator that the client was working with chose the programming team for the development effort, and Beta-Rubicon was chosen to provide project oversight and management. The functional specification developed by Beta-Rubicon served as a scope-of-work agreement for the development team, and the project was bid for a fixed price. Beta-Rubicon first developed a project development plan and schedule and held a meeting with the stakeholders and development team to discuss the project. Marketing pressures dictated a rigorous deadline for product delivery, so Beta-Rubicon worked with both the client and developers to identify critical features that could reasonably be implemented in the given timeframe. In the end, reasonable project milestones were established, and the project proceeded according to plan. Key elements of Beta-Rubicon's project management approach included:

- A two-phase approach, with the first phase culminating in a functional (but incomplete) product that was used for early customer testing and marketing
- Weekly status reports and plan/schedule updates issued to the client, developers, project management staff, and key stakeholders, ensuring that all involved knew what was expected and when it was due
- Frequent project milestones with defined deliverables and testing procedures
- A relatively "hands-off" approach to management of the development team, with a tightening of control if milestone objectives were not achieved
- Facilitation of communications between the client and development team using Internet based collaboration tools

The product was delivered for beta testing three weeks behind the original schedule forecast due to additional requirements introduced by the client during the software development period (which were tracked as additions to the specification). The product has since been commercially released.