Eight Signs You’re Ready to Shut the Doors on Your Outdated Requirements Management Tool

Plus a practical checklist to help make the switch

When formal PC-based requirements management tools were introduced in the early 1990s, they quickly became the standard for how companies could manage requirements. Instead of trawling through reams of documents and spreadsheets in multiple three-ring binders, companies now had an easier way to manage complex requirements. However, the usefulness of many of these “pre-Internet” requirements management tools has waned over time, and some users feel that their design, architecture, and approach for managing requirements are stuck in the past. Many organizations, especially those with large global development teams, feel that their current requirements management tools have just not kept up with the times with issues like rigid desktop UIs, point-to-point integrations, and limited-functionality web clients. With the advent of the cloud, mobile, web services, and other technological advances, many organizations had hoped that requirements management vendors would move their products to a more modern platform. However, even today, many companies still have not announced any clear plans to upgrade their tools.

If you’ve spent years using older requirements management tools, when does it make sense to move away from them? When is it perfectly fine to keep using them? There are no easy answers, but below are eight signs that will help you decide if you should look elsewhere for a requirements management solution. Just put a checkmark next to the items that match your current situation.

1. You have distributed development teams
   Many older requirements management tools force distributed development teams and partners to install a large desktop client to work with requirements, which may not be possible in many environments. Running the client usually consumes significant computer network capacity, often preventing people from using other applications to complete their work. Also, many web clients do not provide all the needed functionality.

2. Your customers want better visibility
   Many requirements management tools provide no easy way for business users to get visibility into the status of their requirements. It's unrealistic to ask business users to download a thick client just to view requirements status and details as they progress through the development lifecycle. Furthermore, enhancements and change requests are often not associated with requirements updates and end up contributing to the “black hole” of development.

3. Teams don't get timely status updates
   Many requirements management tools don't make it easy to know when team members have updated requirements. Unless team members are actively checking up on specific items, the lack of any workflow forces updates to sit idly in developers' queues. Without any workflow enforcement, users are scrambling on their own with no direction.

4. IT overhead is too high
   Having to deploy all updates or patches to every desktop with a requirements management tool installed is cumbersome and tedious. It's often impractical to have IT ensure all users are on the same compatible version. Furthermore, large data transfers with some tools often require dedicated server farms to handle requirements.

5. User adoption is decreasing or low
   Low or declining user adoption with requirements management tools is a sign of several things: users find the tool too hard to use, users don't see the value of using it, and users are using familiar applications like Microsoft Office to manage requirements.
Requirements reuse is low
Many requirements management tools embed requirements inside document hierarchies and force team members to create stand-alone copies if they want to “reuse” requirements. Instead of requirements reuse, customers end up with a maze of orphaned requirements.

You’re afraid of upgrading
With many point integrations, customer scripts, and extensive customizations, upgrading requirements tools is often a risky endeavor. Many organizations end up stuck on old versions and end up paying maintenance costs for enhancements they can never leverage.

Requirements is a big bottleneck
A hard-to-use requirements management system can lead to unexpected development bottlenecks, as everyone starts piling on their work on just a handful of “dedicated” users who actually know how to update requirements in an outdated tool.

If you checked any of the boxes above, you should strongly consider leaving your current requirements management deployment behind. There are many viable alternatives, but you should look for solutions that have the following five characteristics:

1. Provides requirements capabilities and visibility from initial customer request to release into production
2. Offers customers and partners quick and easy requirements access, without any client-side installation or extensive IT overhead
3. Provides open integrations to third-party tools
4. Offers workflow capabilities to notify team members of requirements updates
5. Enables “real” requirements reuse without the creation of orphaned copies

Four Practical Migration Strategies
Once you identify a valid alternative to your current requirements management system, what migration strategy makes the most sense for you? Here are some questions that you should consider in your migration:

1. Do you really need to migrate existing data?
2. How much and how complex is your data in your current system?
3. Do you have a lot of point-to-point integrations?
4. How complex are your current processes involving your current system?
5. What percent of users are actively using your current system?

Start Fresh: The more limited the data, processes, and users you have involved with your current system, the easier it is to start fresh or do a complete migration.
You may also want to start fresh if you have many unsatisfied users or if your current system is just shelfware. Introducing a modern requirements management system will likely excite your team and get you on the right path to better requirements.

- **New User Training**: If your data in your current system is very complex (because of years of usage or the types of requirements you manage) and the number of users is limited, it may be easier to introduce the new requirements solution to a completely new user base initially. Once they have been trained and are using the alternative, you can then turn your attention to your more “locked-in” users of your current system.

- **Phased Rollout**: When you have many users for your current system but limited data, a phased rollout of your requirements alternative is recommended. You can start a new pilot with a new project and bring in the new solution for that project’s team members initially.

- **Stay the Course**: If you have a large amount of data, processes, and users involved with your current system, your best alternative may be to just continue using it for those projects. There’s always a phased rollout for new projects to take advantage of modern, up-to-date technology and functionality.