

NOT NEGOTIABLE

Graham Oakes says requirements are at the core of systems development.



Graham Oakes: consider the squishy aspects of the system

Requirements. We may argue about how to define them – the BPM camp defines processes, then decomposes them down into smaller elements. The SOA camp starts with services, aggregating them up to build processes and other offerings. Acceptance test-driven development uses test cases. Others swear by data analysis, formal methods, or some other way in.

We may argue about when to define them – the agilistas spread the effort throughout development, defining requirements ‘just in time’ for implementation. Traditionalists favour documenting a solid foundation of requirements before committing too heavily to design and code.

But whatever the differences, everyone agrees that defining requirements is an essential part of successful development.

So why are so few development projects successful? Could it be that this mania for defining requirements is getting us tangled up somewhere? You see, I don’t think we define requirements at all. I think we negotiate them.

Here’s what happens on most projects I’ve seen. Someone starts out with a bright idea. They spend some time selling this idea to the powers that be. As they do this, they reshape the idea in order to bring key players on board. They may horse-trade a few favours. Eventually they get given some resources to pursue the idea further.

Our champion now takes those resources and uses them to build an implementation team. The first thing this team does is reshape the idea to fit their technical capabilities. Complex elements get dropped. Estimates are made and re-made as the team try to squeeze the idea into the available budget.

That doesn’t sound to me like a definition process, with all its connotations of analysis and clarity. It sounds to me like a winding, messy negotiation.

This mismatch creates problems for systems development teams. For a start, they prepare themselves for the wrong task. They set out to look for answers rather than trade-offs. They don’t fully consider all the squishy aspects of the system and its environment. They don’t train people in negotiation skills.

Secondly, when one party is ‘defining’ and the other party is ‘negotiating’, there can be only one winner. The people who spend all their lives negotiating – salespeople and procurement specialists, for example – take over the process.

However, they only win the opening rounds. Eventually the project runs into non-negotiable reality. Days only have 24 hours. Any team can only do so much in that time. If the people who best understand this reality lose out too heavily in the opening negotiations, then eventually they take the whole edifice down.

Negotiation isn’t dishonourable or unethical. It’s a fact of life. Done well, it can lead to uncovering solutions that provide benefits for all parties. So let’s start doing it well.

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