

LIVING WITH THE MESS

Accept that software projects are always going to be a pain, urges Graham Oakes.



Graham Oakes: few organisations face up to the messiness

Software development projects are messy: we get things wrong more often than we get them right.

For example, we define requirements, then people tell us what's wrong about them; then we refine, and refine again. Eventually we get to something we can mostly all agree on. But there's a lot of mess along the way. And the same happens with design. And so on.

If we're waterfall, we do the loops in one configuration. If we're agile, we do them in a slightly different configuration. But the loops, the messiness, are inherent to what we do. It's called learning.

If we started out on a project with no need to learn – if we already knew exactly what needed to be done and how to do it – then it probably wouldn't be worth managing as a project. It would simply be routine operations, not innovative enough to justify the added attention that a project requires.

Few organisations will face up to this messiness. Messiness is painful. It means constantly admitting that you were wrong, that your 'best guess' of an estimate wasn't good enough, that your original design sucked, that your brilliant business idea won't work.

Some people are better at admitting this than others, but few of us find it truly easy. So organisations find ways to hide the pain. Two common ways of avoiding this pain are:

- The illusion of control. Organisations pretend to be in control of their environment. They tell themselves stories about how their actions created effects, when really they just wandered along semi-random walks.

Occasionally even a random walk will create wealth. Consider entrepreneurs: every successful entrepreneur attributes their wealth to their own intelligence, force of character, etc. Yet many intelligent, forceful entrepreneurs fail – good luck plays a large part.

- The illusion of action. People do a lot of stuff that never quite leads to the moment of truth, the point where they test their thinking against external reality. They have lots of meetings and do lots of analysis and build lots of models. They even build prototypes and pilots. But they never quite get to the point of fully committing to action.

Not everything we do is illusory, but these illusions are a lot more common than most of us will admit.

Pain comes when reality collides with the illusion, when we can no longer deny our ignorance. If we deny the reality for long enough, then the collision comes in one big hit. For many projects, such a hit is fatal.

Projects are messy. If we accept this mess, and engage with it, then the pain comes in smaller hits. Such pain is survivable. It's the way we learn.

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