

STEPS IN THE DARK

People have to get much cleverer at seeing the real impact of their interventions in SOA projects, says Graham Oakes.



Graham Oakes: we rarely have enough insight to see the side-effects of what we do

Once upon a time there was a small, start-up IT company. It developed a good system, hit an interesting spot in the market, and was very successful. So it grew. A few people became tens, and then hundreds. People started to lose touch with each other and with what they were all doing.

So our heroic little company developed a software project planning process. People came to the central planning committee with their ideas. The committee prioritised them. It allocated resources to them. It determined who should work on which development project. And everyone knew what was going on.

Except that they didn't. Because something funny happened along the way. The central committee lost touch with what was really going on in the projects. It could never spend enough time to really understand any individual project. It lacked the skills needed to ask deep questions of the project teams.

Although the committee gave a semblance of control, it was causing people to hide the truth – to use backdoors and workarounds rather than the official process – more than they revealed it.

Life is full of unintended consequences like that. Think of Fred Brooks' adage: "Adding people to a late project makes it later." Or the strict password policies that cause people to write their passwords on Post-its and stick them to their screens.

One of the interesting things about unintended consequences is that it's very hard for the people who created them to recognise what's happening.

The project manager who delays their already-late project by adding more people responds to these delays by adding yet more people. The central planning committee builds a more intrusive oversight regime, causing people to retreat even further into their workarounds.

We rarely have enough insight to see the side-effects of what we do, especially when under the pressure of deadlines, organisational politics, resource constraints and so on.

So here's my question to you: what unintended consequences is your SOA initiative creating?

For example, many SOA projects seek to identify 'best practices' and embed them into services which can then be re-used across the organisation. Yet few practices are really best for every situation – what works in one context can fail dismally when applied in a different culture or for a different customer segment.

By embedding 'best practice', are you really just disseminating mediocre service? How do you know?

Of course, I'm not against re-use. What I'm against is mindless re-use. And mindless centralisation. And mindless decentralisation. And so on.

Every time we create a new service, or refine an existing one, we are intervening in a complex socio-technical system. To make effective interventions, we need step back occasionally and look for the unintended consequences of our actions.

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