

FIT OR FATIGUED?

Graham Oakes wonders how many companies are just not ready for change, rather than sick of it.



Graham Oakes: people need to build their capacity for change

Say I decided that I wanted to run in next year's London Marathon. I'd probably start on a training programme. For example, I might plan to run two miles tomorrow and then gradually ramp up the distance each day until I'm marathon-fit.

So, tomorrow morning I go for a run. After a mile, my lungs will hurt. My legs will hurt. I'll be hot and bothered. I probably won't feel great at all. Does this fatigue mean that running two miles is impossible – that no human being could reasonably be expected to run two miles? Or does it mean that I'm unfit?

One of the issues that afflicts organisations as they try to become more agile is this thing called 'change fatigue'. It may hit you in three places as a service oriented architecture starts to affect the way you integrate and reconfigure systems:

1. Your IT development organisation.

People will probably be asked to work on more and smaller projects. They may have less detailed specifications to work from. They'll probably be interacting much more closely with business specialists. Projects will be less formal, more fuzzy, faster. The long, steady start-up phase of projects, where people caught their breath after the last project, will be gone.

2. Your IT support organisation.

There will be calls to make frequent, small releases as projects deliver new increments of functionality. This will put pressure on regression testing and service introduction processes. It will stress configuration management systems. The deep heartbeat of regular, structured releases will become a clamour of constant change.

3. Business users.

The functionality available to them will change from month to month. Screens will contain new fields. Reports will show new information. For the managers who are calling for change, this is fine. But many people's heads will be spinning with what feels like unmanaged change.

I suspect that these are often signs of change unfitness rather than change fatigue. Organisations (and people) need to build their capacity for change just like they need to build programming skills or customer service capabilities.

Any initiative to build 'business agility' – whether through SOA or business process management or agile development or any other route – that doesn't address this underlying organisational change capacity is probably going to sputter out.

Of course, there's still a question about my marathon attempt. Is the right way to build my marathon-fitness to start with a two-mile run? Maybe one mile would be better? And how fast should I ramp up?

Designing the right training regime is tough. But without that underlying fitness, any organisational change is going to be extremely painful. Conversely, I suspect that change-fit organisations can get significant benefits from almost any tool they try.

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