



White paper

May 26th

A true story of a foolish company

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Scoutwest, Inc.

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This is a true story of a dot-com company. The story begins in December 1999, shortly after I joined the company as one of the leading contractors. The consulting company I co-founded was brought in to help in the development of the world's "next great thing" in software. My business partner and I were not employees, investors, or even high-level managers, just contract resources with a few years of proven ability to deliver.

The company, which shall go unnamed, had been loosely formed in the summer of 1999, and three of us created the first prototype of the product in the fall of that year. We produced the prototype in one great "coding summit" lasting about three days. It was a working product. The company had quickly gained several angel investors and was flush with cash and new offices by December. That was the perfect time for our first big all-hands meeting in Atlanta.

Our first series of developer meetings, schmoozing, and kickoff party took place in the new offices in December. There were about a dozen "developer" guys in attendance, most of the m eager new employees, equity shareholders all, and stoked to go. The average age at the table was 28, although one Senior VP of Engineering acted as general overseer and adult supervision. After some morning feature meetings and lunch, the infamous "May 26" meeting began.

The Senior VP took the floor and after a wonderful rallying speech proudly announced the ship date for the product, May 26, 2000! I was stunned. Had I missed something? Only hours before, in our feature meetings, we had discussed product vision and requirements in very general terms, not agreeing on much of anything. We had no customer requirements documents, no system design, no development or QA plans, no marketing results, no documentation, and no project schedule. Furthermore, features were still being discussed in general terms. Most of the team had never worked together. Only a few of the

developers had ever talked with potential customers. In short, we had no idea what we were building. So, how could the VP know the ship date? Where was his supporting research? Many of the participants had been tipped off about the proposed date beforehand. The younger guys just beamed with eager anticipation of the rich and glorious equity payoff just five short months away. Wow! This Internet stuff is just groovy! My colleagues and I were stunned and in a state of dreamlike disbelief.

The May 26 ship date was discussed for quite some time, maybe an hour, and supported by the VP with some impressive project management drawings and terms on the white board. It was “obvious” he was well schooled, and knew what he was talking about. Then he did something I’ll never forget. He passed out a stack of plain white papers with the simple text “May 26, 2000” in 50-point landscape font. The pages contained no other text. We were each to sign a page and pass it to our left until all the pages were signed. We’d each have our own signed copy to inspire us for the task ahead. What a cheesy ploy.

Later that night, we all attended a kickoff party where the May 26 date was reinforced. Unbeknownst to us, the company had even purchased a large LED countdown clock that displayed the time remaining until May 26th in 100th second increments! The following day we were seated side-by-side in a circle in one large room. The CEO had another awe-inspiring exercise in store for us. He handed out videotapes of the inspiring October Sky movie, and wanted each participant to verbally answer two questions: “What percentage of probability do we have of shipping by May 26th”, and “What is our probability of success if we do”? The result was glorious! Everyone answered, in turn, with “100%” and other positive confessions. In the minds of leadership, the meetings were a resounding success!

Unfortunately things didn’t work out as they planned, but this is where the story ends. Ask me how the product and company turned out. That’s a different story.

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