



White paper

Planning makes projects faster

How a little process can improve project efficiency

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Every development project follows a process whether the participants know it or not. A process is simply the series of steps you follow to get from point A to point B. Even “creative” people follow processes, even if they won’t admit it. It is a simple fact of human nature. Without process, a development project would be like employing a room full of typing monkeys to produce War and Peace. It could happen, but the random nature of the process would introduce long delays, uncertainty, and lot of rework before the tome was complete.

Many people do not know they are following a process, and some won’t admit it. Process, within some development organizations, is spurned because it initially sounds like a waste of development time. Process is viewed as pure overhead. Inexperienced people say, “we can slam this product out before you even get the requirements document written.” Why bother with process? The two mistakes made in this line of reasoning are: assuming that process is pure overhead and that it doesn’t lead to more productive work, and not knowing that a project unsupported by process leads to repeated rework. Repeated rework is known as thrash. It is the repeated act of fixing mistakes that should have been dealt with earlier in the... process.

The creative process of development has natural phases of work. Early phases are naturally strategic, while later ones are tactical. You first figure out what you are going to do (strategic), and then you do it (tactical). Understanding this is very important for efficiency reasons. Breaking a project up into phases, and assigning a percentage of strategy vs. tactics to each phase can help you visualize the concept. Phases also help define the work to be accomplished. Think of the entire project as a river of water with many possible branches, and your team in a canoe. Taking a wrong turn upstream can lead you to an entirely different place than you expected. Wrong turns near the beginning of the river cost you more time in course corrections than wrong turns near the end. The

same is true of upstream phases during development. Wrong strategy leads to a lot of tactical rework. The cost of correcting mistakes increases as you travel farther from the point of error. People who say that process is pure overhead don't understand this dynamic, and often don't learn from their mistakes.

Consider that, in some projects, products are completely redesigned, reimplemented, and retested because of bad customer requirements – an error in strategic judgment. Some features need to be reengineered, rearchitected, and reimplemented, because they just don't work during product testing. Others are reimplemented and retested because of poor tactical implementation. These are all examples of thrash that take place during product development. And they are almost always a result of poor strategic planning near the beginning of the project. A “containment policy” can reduce this thrash by containing and correcting mistakes within the phase they were created in. Containment keeps mistakes from affecting downstream phases, but it makes people uneasy because it requires extra analysis time to discover mistakes. People are impatient and anxious to press on to new things. This impatience can cost your project dearly. It is important to have strong managers who can hold back the reins and make certain that all the issues are resolved before moving forward. Erring on the side of process is less expensive than the alternative.

In bad projects, the ratio of thrash to productive work increases to the point where the project stalls. Everyone starts to notice the problem but nobody knows why it happened, and nobody can correct it. The project is simply canceled and everybody is reassigned. Even in successful projects the effective volume of actual work can be significantly reduced by repeated rework. People normally don't notice this because morale remains high. Nevertheless, during these times, your company is experiencing a reduction in efficiency, making it less competitive.

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