DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Graham Oakes counts up the cost of hesitation on software projects.

Graham Oakes: not all decisions can be deferred

People like decisiveness. They like to know where they stand. When they ask questions, they want clear answers.

Software architects, on the other hand, like to defer decisions. They try to create options that allow multiple courses of action at future decision points. They often answer questions with abstractions, thus deferring commitment but also causing a lot of frustration to developers and managers alike.

I think it's worth trying to understand the dynamic here. Indecision creates a number of costs. For example:

● There are costs to team performance. Many people perform less effectively when they feel uncertain. They lose confidence. They argue. Morale goes down. And when a clear answer does emerge, they may no longer be paying sufficient attention to notice it.

● There are costs to team members. Organisations often penalise indecision. People who make clear and rapid decisions are seen as leaders, and get promoted or otherwise rewarded.

This cost is exacerbated by the fact that it's generally easier to measure the speed of decision making than the quality of the resulting decisions. The latter may take months or even years to emerge, way beyond the timeframes of most reward frameworks.

● There are costs to managers. Deferring decisions can have large cognitive costs for managers. From their perspective, once they make a decision, the issue is closed – the team now just need to get on with implementing it.

If they don't make the decision, the issue will keep resurfacing. They may end up dealing with it multiple times. They find it a lot easier to close off the issue now.

● There are costs to good decision making. Sometimes the best way to take a decision is to wait for more information to arrive. But other times you need to probe at the problem – to try things out and see what impact they have.

In these latter circumstances, deferring the decision doesn't work: the desired information will never arrive of its own accord. Taking almost any course of action is more effective than waiting.

Against this, over-decisiveness has one clear cost – you make the wrong decisions. By committing too soon, you ignore all the information that would have been available if you'd waited until a decision was truly necessary.

Of course, not all decisions can be deferred. Some need to be probed. Some are so fundamental to your systems that they need to be set out clearly from the outset. (These decisions are often couched as architectural principles.)

One of the arts of architecture is knowing which decisions need to be made now.

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