

ONE NECK TO WRING

When it comes to doomed web development projects, finding the right person to blame can be tricky, says Graham Oakes.



Graham Oakes: defining clear governance is hard work

Who owns the web? Not the actual ownership of the world wide web...but which person in your company is accountable for what you do on the web?

Have you noticed that this is a question that mostly comes up when things are going wrong? If a web development project is ahead of schedule and winning plaudits from all stakeholders, then people rarely start looking for owners. It's only when they run into problems that people think about governance.

We all know this is wrong. For a start, while we're looking for an owner, we're not doing much to actually solve the problem. And if the owner had been defined upfront, then they might have acted to prevent the problem occurring in the first place. Yet companies persist in leaving ownership and accountability fuzzy. Why is this?

I see three common reasons:

- Firstly, we ask simplistic questions. No one person owns the web. Not in its entirety and, as a general rule, not within the confines of any company. Ownership of the web, or the customer, or the SOA, is complex, because these are complex entities.

Seeking a simplistic answer quickly becomes intractable for a host of reasons: political, technical, historical and intellectual. On the other hand, if we set out to understand accountability for a complex network of interacting factors, then we have some hope of unravelling it.

- Secondly, defining clear governance is hard work. We need to develop a clear view of what assets must be governed. We need to identify all the people who have a stake in each asset, and to resolve boundary disputes.

This work isn't sexy. Many people would rather just get on with the fun stuff. If you think crisis management is fun, then that's a good approach.

- Finally, many people have an interest in keeping things fuzzy. If we don't know who the owner is, we can't blame them when things go wrong. If the boundaries are unclear, then people can grab more territory for themselves.

Clear governance is possible. I've seen places where the organisational assets were clearly mapped out, typically into some sort of well-structured enterprise architecture.

These places then recognised that different ownership models could apply to different assets – some were owned by a single person; some were jointly owned by a duopoly; some were federated and managed by some sort of governance board.

They didn't try to fit every asset into a single, simplistic model. I commend this approach to you.

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