TOO TIRED TO DECIDE

Software integration projects can be scuppered by 'decision fatigue' warns Graham Oakes.

Graham Oakes: manage your decision energy

Integration is about decisions. We decide which stakeholders and functions to prioritise. We trade-off time, cost, security, usability, maintenance, etc. Tough choices.

How do we make those decisions? Often via workshops. We put the options on the table. We spend a few hours arguing. Then when everyone's got their head around the issues, we make the decisions. Sounds good? Not really.

This is a great way to drive ourselves into 'decision fatigue'. Making decisions requires a lot of mental energy. Every decision depletes our pool of energy. Those initial arguments about options and trade-offs ensure we have just about zero energy left when it comes to the major decisions at the end.

When energy is low, biases creep in. First, we take the easy route. This is generally either 'do nothing' or some default option. So there's a bias towards inaction, or towards the preference of whoever sets the default. We're about as decisive as a flock of sheep.

Second, we make one-dimensional decisions. Rather than make thoughtful trade-offs, we focus on optimising a single factor. Instead of balancing performance, security and usability, say, we simply select the most secure options.

You've probably seen senior managers do this. They hurry between meetings trying to appear decisive. They end up making a bunch of simplistic, uni-dimensional decisions. It's not that they're idiots; they just have no energy left for nuanced thought.

Here are some ways to preserve decision energy and hence avoid such biases:

1. Decide the decision strategy upfront. Don't spend energy 'deciding how to decide' in the workshop; do it beforehand.

2. Avoid decisions where possible. We have architectural policies and suchlike for a reason: they let us focus our energy on the tough, non-routine decisions. Unless there's a good reason to go against policy, save your energy.

3. Be prepared to sacrifice. Accept 'good-enough' decisions when they present themselves. If a workable solution has been identified, don't waste energy exploring further options unless you really need to optimise this decision.

4. Manage the schedule. 'Sleep on it' is good advice – we all have more energy after a good night's sleep and a decent breakfast. Maybe you can explore options in one workshop, then make decisions in a follow-on session? If you can't wait that long, at least schedule a break and some refreshments.

5. Keep your options open. Not every decision needs to be made immediately. By delaying you can monitor the situation and learn more, making the decision easier when it is required.

Above all, manage your decision energy. Stop and take a break if it's low. When it comes to decision making, energy matters as much as analysis.

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