

GET REAL!

Projects are an artificial way to organise work, says Graham Oakes. So what does that really mean?



Graham Oakes: projects aren't the only game in town

I spend a lot of time on projects. I've worked on projects to build customer databases, e-commerce systems, websites – even projects to define how we do projects.

The idea of the project as the fundamental unit of work is pervasive within software development. Many organisations are structured around their project portfolio. A large industry – think PRINCE2, the PMI and similar bodies – has emerged to service the interests of projects.

But how real is a project? Projects don't arise from some law of nature. They're a mental construct we've created to help ourselves organise work.

We've reasoned that dividing work into chunks called projects makes it easier to co-ordinate related activities. In others words, a project is a model, an abstraction we use to help make sense of the world.

As the saying goes, 'All models are wrong; some are useful'. So the concept of a project is a simplification – life sometimes doesn't split so cleanly. Thus I often see problems such as:

- **Projects create artificial boundaries.** The split between development and maintenance, for example. One day we're finishing features within a project; the next day the refinement of those same features is managed through some different mechanism. Hence the arguments about 'bug' versus 'enhancement'.
- **Some activities don't fit neatly into projects.** People have to do stuff that doesn't belong to any project. Because it's not part of a project, we don't allocate time for it and don't resolve conflicting priorities. How often have you seen a project fail to progress because people's time is being spent elsewhere?
- **Projects become ragbags of unrelated activities.** To avoid the above, we put everything into projects. So we end up with projects that aggregate an incoherent set of activities purely for the convenience of our mental abstraction. Then we add project management overheads.

Such problems are especially common in architectural work, which naturally tends to cut across project boundaries. They're all signs that our model is breaking down.

Trends in software development reflect this. Agile teams are going to tighter iterations – 30-day sprints, the norm when Scrum started, have become seven days. Continuous deployment is more common. Kanban teams move away from iterations in order to deliver a continuous flow of features into production. Projects are no longer the fundamental organising model in these situations.

That doesn't mean projects are irrelevant. Some work does fall neatly into projects. And projects have served many organisations well. I can certainly think of places where lack of decent project management has created a nightmare.

But projects aren't the only game in town. Be prepared to adjust the model for your reality.

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