IF IT HURTS, IT'S DOING YOU GOOD

Graham Oakes explains why you should embrace the most painful elements of project development.

Graham Oakes: 'ignore it and it'll go away' is a fantasy

I avoid pain. If something hurts, I stop doing it. Most organisations are the same. Testing hurts, so they do as little as possible. Integration is painful, so they avoid it for as long as possible. Application deployment is a mess, so they hive it off to a separate team, insulating everyone else from the agony.

This rarely works. Eventually we have to test, integrate and deploy our systems. When we try to avoid the pain, all we do is batch it up for later. Then it hits us in large lumps and often at the worst possible time.

The real issue here is that we're misreading the source of our pain. Testing and suchlike activities aren't inherently painful – they hurt because they reveal problems created earlier in the process. Defer the pain and you leave these problems lurking within your systems.

A better strategy is to do the painful things as early as possible and frequently thereafter. This has several good consequences:

● **Short feedback loops make diagnosis easier.** People are bad at diagnosing problems when there's a time lag between cause and symptom. The sooner we reveal the painful symptoms, the easier it is to identify the underlying problem.

● **It's easier to deal with pain in small chunks.** Crises put us off balance. We think less clearly and revert to more primal behaviour patterns. It's hard to fix problems when people are panicking.

● **Pain often grows worse when we ignore it.** 'Ignore it and it'll go away' is a fantasy. Problems tend to arise from issues such as mismatched assumptions across teams. The longer these mismatches remain, the more deeply they get embedded within subsystems.

● **Practice makes perfect.** When people do stuff regularly, they get better at it. Organisations which test, integrate and deploy continuously learn how to do these things well, so they impose lower overheads on the overall process. This lets people focus their energy on developing new services.

● **People build good habits.** Over time, identifying and dealing with problems regularly and in small chunks becomes an ingrained way of working. You start to find ways to improve the system even without pain to trigger the search.

One consequence of this strategy is that the sources of pain migrate over time. As you get better at identifying and eliminating pain points in one area, other areas start to generate comparatively more pain. So you automatically shift your focus onto those areas.

That's what people mean when they talk of a 'culture of continuous improvement'. Organisations with such a culture don't avoid pain. They actively seek it out, so they can eliminate it before it causes problems.

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