CORE INCOMPETENCIES

Graham Oakes argues that companies should do more of the integration stuff they're hopeless at.

Graham Oakes: we simply don't get enough chance to practise

"If you're bad at something, then do more of it." Doesn't sound right, does it? After all, the management gurus are all telling us to focus on what we're good at, and outsource the rest.

Yet some people in the agile and lean development movements are taking precisely the above stance. And there's an interesting logic behind this…

Many organisations try to avoid the things they're bad at. Having problems with testing and quality assurance? Then delay it until the end of the project, and hope it will all work out somehow.

Integrating subsystems is a source of pain? Then do it in one big bang, and at least the pain will be concentrated at a single point rather than hurting throughout the project.

What generally happens in these cases is that the problems overwhelm us when we do address them.

Testing surfaces issues which require us to make fundamental changes to our system design. Integration raises underlying assumptions and organisational agendas which can't be addressed without reframing the entire project. And these issues hit us near the end of the project, when there just isn't enough time to solve them well.

A second dynamic also hits us here – because we do these things rarely, we never become particularly good at them. We simply don't get enough chance to practise.

Conversely, if we do a little testing and integration every day, we build our skills. Not only do the problems come to us in smaller batches and at an earlier point, when they are easier to deal with, but we also have better skills to deal with them when they do arise. That certainly sounds like a winning proposition.

So what is it that holds us back from doing this? For a start, we may have to tolerate an initial reduction to our pace in order to develop a steady, sustainable cadence for the long run.

The team which focuses purely on coding will spring forwards hare-like compared to the tortoises who also spend time on testing, integration, refactoring and suchlike. Few managers find it easy to tolerate tortoises.

Secondly, in order to address weak areas, we need to make them visible.

One reason for the success of the Toyota Production System is the emphasis it places on making bottlenecks visible, and then on addressing them immediately. This takes courage. Few managers want to expose their weaknesses to their peers. And although many organisations talk about the importance of visibility, they often reward obfuscation.

So perhaps the best preamble to improving your organisation's integration and agility isn't to develop the right architecture. It might be to identify what you're bad at, and do more of it.

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