

SLOWWWLY DOES IT

When it comes to development projects, Graham Oakes sides with the tortoise.



Graham Oakes: not calling for 'quick wins'

Many software projects feel like a full-frontal assault. I once worked on a CRM project, for example, where the client had two options on the table: invest huge sums in kitting out their staff with the latest customer insight and hence become a high-service provider; or invest equally huge sums in business process automation and hence become a low-cost provider.

After investigating both paths, we stumbled upon a third option: invest moderate sums in analysing the customer data already held and use this information to create carefully tailored services for different market segments.

In hindsight, this hardly seems like a dramatic strategic leap, but at the time it was transformational. And it was relatively cheap to implement.

Too often, we don't look for such options. Perhaps we get caught up in the excitement of implementing a large system. Perhaps there are too many incentives to set up large projects – the path to promotion, for example, often lies through a series of progressively larger projects.

Or perhaps we simply don't have time to sit back and think whether there are alternative, less showy ways to get to the desired goal. So we set up our full-frontal assaults, then watch people wither under the fire.

I'm not calling here for 'quick wins', so much beloved of many consultancies. These more subtle paths may still involve a lot of careful preparation and require long implementations. But they're inherently less influenced by industry trends, and more tailored to a thoughtful analysis of the organisation's current situation and goals.

So how do we set up such projects? I'm not sure I have a clear answer, but the following things seem useful to me:

- **A sense of enquiry.** When we give ourselves time to explore the situation – what's working, where the problems lie, what strengths and weaknesses the organisation can bring to bear – without getting locked in to a preferred solution, then interesting options are more likely to emerge.
- **Engagement with diverse stakeholders.** When I talk to the obvious people (ie, the ones whom project managers think I should be talking to), they tend to give obvious answers. When I have side conversations with more peripheral players, they often provide surprising insights. Many of these insights may be irrelevant, but some of them lead to new perspectives.
- **Genuine risk analysis.** Most risk analyses document the acceptable risks, the things that might go wrong without raising real questions of fear or blame. When you talk to people about what really worries them, they often point in very different directions.

Above all, this is about time. We've become obsessed with rapid results. It's time we did a few more slow projects.

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