allan's blog - Agile & Digital Business

I help companies and teams that create software.

Wednesday, January 18, 2017

A sad Cobol story

This isn't a happy story, it has no happy ending, I suffered personally, its personal but I want to share.

Its about trying to solve a problem with the fashionable solution rather than rolling back the last fashionable solution you applied which created the problem to start with…

A long time ago, well, the best part of 10 years ago, in a town far far away (actually the other side of London) I went to help a small part of a very large company "become agile".

The managers wanted to be "agile" and insisted they knew what it meant and what the implications were. So my job was merely to help the change resistant workers change.

Now this company, like so many others, had decided that coding was expensive and should be done in a far away place, and this time I do really mean far away, far enough away to be cheaper.

The system in question was big, and old, over 20 years old, and millions of lines of Cobol. Fortunately the company still employed most of the people who had built the system over 20 years. Unfortunately they were to forbidden to code. They were too expensive for that. So the far away cheap people coded. I forget the job title the old coders were given, maybe it was SME but I thought of them as Architects - although Systems Analyst might have been a better title.

The far away coders, employed by a "partner" (outsourcer) were young, they lack programming experience. I suspect they had learned Java at college and been given a Cobol boot camp when they joined the partner. From what I could tell they were quite capable of making a code change at the function level but… anything involving system structure, multiple functions or some of the larger (too big) functions required help.

They needed to talk to the architects.

To avoid this the big company had the architects write "design" documents. But still the coders needed regular conference calls.

These coders also had a habit of changing, after 18 months on the contract the outsourcer moved them on. But then, many of them didn't last that long; many left of their own accord before then. Consequently, just as one of the coders got to the point off properly understanding Cobol and the system they were gone.

To make sure the right work was done the big company had Business Analysts detail the need in big documents. Lots more to read.

Of course all this required a lot of testing for the partner, plus another partner (in a third location), and internal "user acceptance testing" (in a fourth location.) Implicitly the process and managers accepted lots of failure and expected testing to generate a lot of (re)work.

Now something else happens when you use an outsourcer and so many people: you need more management, at both the client and supplier.

All this complexity (not to mention cost) piled up and made them unresponsive. Hence they wanted to be Agile! That's why I was there.

Every so often one of the projects would get into a real mess and the architects would be allow to take over and code. When this happened it was completed in a few weeks.

Most of the offshore efforts took months.

Yes the company was saving money on programmers but…

- They were spending more on business analysts and architects
- They were spending a lot on test
- They were spending a fortune on managing

But most of all they were paying in late deliveries, new products not in the market, delayed cost reduction initiatives and so on. Plus they were pained by poor completing date forecasts.

And it was getting worse.

So of course Agile was the answer.

Contributors

- Allan Kelly
- allankelly2015

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- Xanpan
- Little Book of User Stories
- Business Patterns
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- Agile Reader

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Software Acumen: 27-29 September at Cambridge

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The company ignored knowledge, or at least thought it could be written down. They saw the problem as expensive typists.

And me?

I diagnosed the problem as managers failing to understand, hence I wanted to spend time talking to managers. But they said they already understood and Agile was the answer so my wanted to talk to them was not what they wanted.

I crashed and burned.

Posted by Allan Kelly at 10:16 am

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Jim Grey 6 months ago - Shared publicly

I suppose this is the risk of consultancy.

My brother went to consult with a young company that thought it needed to add testing. He looked at their problem set and concluded they needed application monitoring more. So that's what he recommended.

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Joe Schmetzer 6 months ago - Shared publicly

That story rings a few bells :-)

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Allan Kelly 6 months ago

You must be imagining it

Daniel Wood 6 months ago - Shared publicly

Allan, I remember that time well. Although the smaller more nimble teams won over in the end (in places).

· Reply

Allan Kelly 6 months ago

There is always more to the story...

Geert Vermeiren 6 months ago - Shared publicly

I feel your pain.
I have been in (two) similar situations, where developers (too old, too expensive) were forced into becoming architects and being required to produce big upfront designs, that then had to be implemented by juniors with too little knowledge.
My arguments ("there is really a case to be made for senior devs") were met with

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Anna Filina
@afilina

Pro tip: if your method is 225 lines long, then you should probably refactor your code ASAP. I frown at methods over 50 lines.

18h

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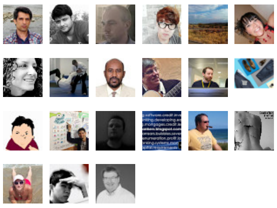

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