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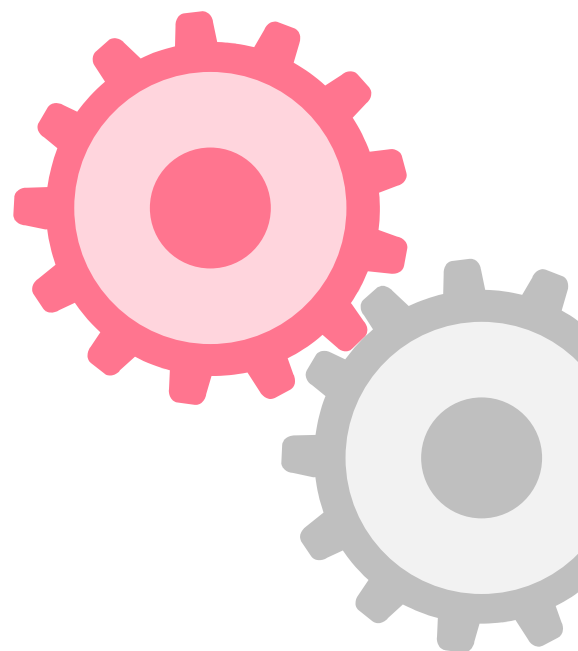
Digital Engineering

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Our approach to digital engineering

Why should you separate the scope from the build?

IT projects are prone to going over-budget and being delivered late. A consistent reason for this under-performance is a general poor level of initial scoping and specification against what are always emergent requirements that need to adapt and change and a general lack of customer technical expertise which means that it is very difficult for them to articulate their needs and wishes comprehensively or to fully understand the technical implications of some of their decisions if they are able to do so.

When a building is commissioned an architect is called in to design it according to a functional, legal and artistic remit, before passing the plans to a builder; commissioning a custom built digital service needs that same level of independent attention during the scoping and specification phase.

Problems occur when customers entrust developers to specify, manage and deliver their project and even more so if they do not become fully engaged in the process, meticulously specifying what all stakeholders require. The customer usually doesn't discover until it is too late that their service specifications were not well-defined, usually when developers want to sign-off deliverables for payment. Discrepancies between requirements and build at this point often lead to conflict, delays and increased costs from mitigating expensive change management.

Contracting with an independent requirements and definition consultancy whose remit is to specify the scope of an digital build project, greatly reduces the risk of incomplete and inaccurate specifications. Our digital architects work alongside you to develop a user-centric set of requirements and specifications before any of the build takes place. They can remain available to help manage the tendering process for you (as required), developing the required documentation to enable a build company to quote a fixed price for a known piece of work. Finally, they can provide robust, independent programme management throughout any build process, acting as your professional advisor, ensuring that you are always in the picture and taking responsibility for the build agency's technical delivery.

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Why do projects fail?

Academic research identifies that up to 15% of all IT projects are expected to fail each year, with many others projects arriving late or over-budget or requiring massive re-working. Few IT projects, in other words, truly succeed. The Office of Government Commerce defines eight common causes of project failure:

1. Lack of clear links between the project and the organisation's key strategic priorities, including agreed measures of success.
2. Lack of clear senior management and Ministerial ownership and leadership.
3. Lack of effective engagement with stakeholders.
4. Lack of skills and proven approach to project management and risk management.
5. Too little attention to breaking development and implementation into manageable steps.
6. Evaluation of proposals driven by initial price rather than long-term value for money (especially securing delivery of business benefits).
7. Lack of understanding of, and contact with the supply industry at senior levels in the organisation.
8. Lack of effective project team integration between clients, the supplier team and the supply chain.

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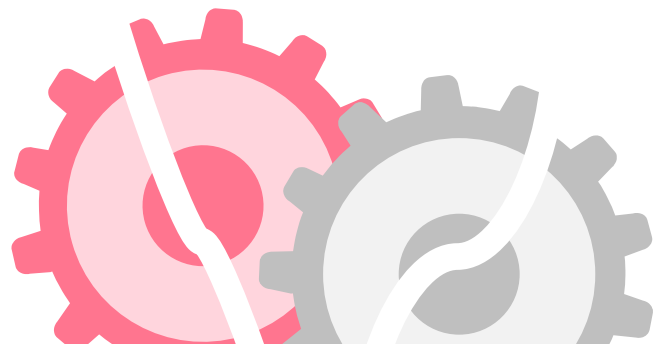
How can we avoid this?

A key obstacle to effectively executing strategic or tactical programmes of work is that customers' often have great difficulty in accurately defining the end product. Requirements definition is a hard, difficult process and organisations often need help and guidance during it.

It is often difficult because for very sensible reasons internally at the customers' end, requirements change or are emergent. Alternatively, they may not have sufficient training to be able to define what can be quite technical requirements or, at least, requirements that have complex technical ramifications.

Key difficulties for organisations developing new solutions are that customers:
- Are not sure what they want.
- Want to be able to change what they want.
- Do not know what is possible.
- Do not know what is possible within their budget.
- Do not know how to set appropriate requirements for the testing criteria to ensure their needs are met.
- Have difficulty defining their stakeholders.
- Have difficulty defining the needs of their stakeholders.
- Have difficulty defining innovative feasible technical solutions to specific procedures.
- Do not know how to organise content within the service.
- Have difficulty aligning priorities with delivery and operational activities.

Why do scope and build projects have problems?

Companies offering vertically integrated, end-end web services (ie scope, design and build) experience inherent conflict because:
- they must make an attractive bid and often under-budget.
- once they have been given the contact they are under tight budget constraints. The company must ensure they do no more work than that defined in the specification.
- builders are encouraged to take risks or short cuts, potentially endangering whole projects, due to in-house time and budget constraints.
- in-house scope and build projects have poor outcomes due to a reliance on oral clarification.

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Where do these problems come from?

The clients' technical knowledge is unlikely to be the same as a specialist technical build providers'. As a result, there is often a language barrier as well as a knowledge gap between the customer and the provider. Nor can they be expected to know best practice technical processes or the correct questions to ask to draw out relevant information from a wide range of their stakeholders, all of which have individual (and sometimes competing) needs, requirements and opinions that should influence the new service.

As a result, it is in a customer's commercial interest to contract with an trusted independent third-party, without a vested interest in the build, who can identify, synthesise and articulate stakeholders' needs and represent these wholly and honestly within detailed specification documentation.

Independent specification can help all parties

When an independent tender, brief and specification is created the service-builder is given a comprehensive unambiguous set of documentation to follow, which has been prepared by experts in the same field. This enables these providers to submit realistic, achievable, thorough budgets for the project.

Specification writers are required to be completely explicit in their write up because they will not have the opportunity to clarify details at a later date, as single-supply projects may do. Builders are therefore under less pressure to cut corners, jeopardising the project, because the details of what is required of them has been explained at the outset.

Project managers can plan ahead with a clear scheme of work from the outset, according to the specification, which can be signed off, avoiding complicated change requests.

Clients benefit from an independent overview, tight specification and fixed price tenders without the typical 'get-out' clauses around a lack of specification.

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Conclusions

Just as with the separation between architects and builders, what has traditionally been thought of in digital and IT projects, as two parts of the same product is actually best divided into two services (architecture/specification and build), helping to avoid the internal conflict caused by defining and building the product by the same company.

Using a trusted, independent expert to help develop a user-centred specification empowers the customer by removing the expertise/language barrier between the organisation and the service-builder. The project can be made to fulfil the needs of the full range of stakeholders' requirements. The customer is provided with a full specification of what they require and are supported throughout to maximise the success of their project.

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About Panlogic

Established in 1999, Panlogic is an independent, dedicated digital agency offering a full range of services, from idea through to execution.

Digital consultancy

Our consultancy offer provides independent scoping and definition services for digital (web/mobile/tablet) devices for applications/websites etc.

Digital support

Our second core offer provides long term, SLA backed hosting/support and maintenance contracts across a wide and certified set of technologies which we run up to 24x7x365 for clients.