

Boring but expensive

I note that the Inland Revenue appears to have lost control of its grand IT project with anticipated costs spiralling by another 3.5 billion. "A billion here, a billion there and pretty soon we are talking real money" as a US Senator once famously quoted. I am often asked as a researcher in systems failure why I do not study major project failures so we can learn how to avoid them in future. Given that authoritative studies suggest as high as 80% of software based projects fail to deliver any significant value to their intended end-user, it seems potentially a very lucrative area to work in and attract lots of funding from people anxious to stop many billions of pounds a year disappearing in a puff of logic in the UK alone.

There are two main reasons why. First of all, everybody makes worried noises but on the whole nobody cares enough because of course it is not going to happen to THEM is it ! Second and of more importance to a researcher, its about as much interest as the sea apparently was to George III, ("is that all it does ?"). When you burrow down through the layers of secrecy, hype, committees, incomprehensible system documentation and so on, there is always a human face grinning up at you from the bottom or trying to get out of the only remaining exit. Major software projects fail for all the usual reasons that normal projects fail but more so because we have no real consistency or engineering basis for what we do. There isn't really any more to it than that.

Take for example, something as basic as project planning and tracking. Its very well understood, widely taught and only a lunatic would conceive of carrying out any kind of significant engineering project without it. Yet its usually the first casualty in the rush to produce the next greatest software project. I've heard all the usual excuses and I don't have any particular desire to hear them again. How about requirements ? This is still one of the most commonly deficient areas because either nobody asks the users, or decides that the users don't know what they want so why ask in the first place. Yes, I've heard all these too.

All you need to generate the next software project disaster is to encase the above in a web of secrecy and jargon where nobody knows what is happening, and employ talking heads to tell us not worry our pretty little heads and to leave these jolly complicated thingies to the experts and, bingo, you've got another one. Simple isn't it. Unfortunately, the scale of waste on Government IT projects alone simply beggars the imagination.

I leave you with my interface of the month. I tried to pay my BT bill by internet banking. The instructions are to quote "the first ten digits of your BT account and bill number ...". It then explains that the account number starts with two letters followed by eight numbers. Given that the bill number starts with two letters followed by a mixture of numbers and letters, what on earth does this mean ? As it happens, it didn't matter because the Barclays interface rejects anything but the account number. Doesn't anybody ever test anything these days ?

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