When Go-Live Falls Short: Lessons in How Software Engineering and Acquisition Best Practice Could Have Saved the Day

Software Engineering Institute
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

Patricia Oberndorf, John Hawrylak, Bryce Meyer
April 2014
**Report Documentation Page**

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. REPORT DATE</th>
<th>2. REPORT TYPE</th>
<th>3. DATES COVERED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28 JAN 2014</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When Go-Live Falls Short: Lessons in How Software Engineering and Acquisition Best Practice Could Have Saved the Day</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6. AUTHOR(S)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oberndorf /Patricia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carnegie Mellon Software Engineering Institute, 4500 Fifth Ave, Pittsburgh, PA 15213</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. REPORT</th>
<th>b. ABSTRACT</th>
<th>c. THIS PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unclassified</td>
<td>unclassified</td>
<td>unclassified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT

SAR

18. NUMBER OF PAGES

17

19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

unclassified

Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.
Outline

The System and the Situation
The Go-Live Experience
Facts Behind the Failures
Best Practices That Could Have Made A Difference
Epilogue
A Few Caveats …

• We will not reveal the exact system on which this is based.
  • However, what we are reporting has been observed in countless systems in our collective experience.
• It is generally based on an IT system that is interoperable across multiple defense and non-defense agencies.
  • But the problems observed here can happen in any sort of system.
The System and the Situation

The basic function of the system is to

- Accept both real-time and batch inputs, which may be less than pristine
- Compare them to prior inputs stored in a repository
- Add them to the repository
- Report back to the user on the results of the comparison

The system originated several years ago as a quick-reaction capability.

- Expedient design
- Expedient contract features

There are a number of COTS products available that support the main mission of the system (the comparison).

There are a large number of users in the field who submit the inputs. Coordination with several other agencies may be required to complete the overall mission of the system.
The Go-Live Experience

The system went to go-live, and things started to happen:
• The system came up, but soon was not keeping up with the workload.
• The users were not getting responses.
• Results were falling on the floor, and submissions were not being entered into the repository.
• The users were soon frustrated.

Result:
• Program was forced to revert to the previous system version while trying to sort out the problems.
Facts Behind the Failure – 1

Further investigation revealed:

- Tests prior to go-live had assumed the inputs (and input formats) expected by the developer
  - Developer made a change in the version of the interface specification
  - Provided change to the input contractor
  - Input organization had chosen not to upgrade
    - Unknown to the Program Office and the development contractor
- There were no end-to-end tests of the actual system flow.
  - Unknown by the developers (or Program Office): some of the coordinating agencies were pre-processing user inputs
    - Both manually and with automated scripts that ran on the platform.
      - Scripts not included in the system build
    - Also unknown by the developers (or Program Office): some coordinating agencies provided personal assistance and service to users
- The requirements process was out of control
Facts Behind the Failure – 2

Further investigation also revealed:

- **Process and skill flaws:**
  - No end-to-end use cases or user process flows
  - Tendency to see system as a set of point solutions rather than stepping back to determine common solutions to multiple needs

- **Management flaws:**
  - Technical staff who had only a minimal understanding of the system and how it worked
  - Failure to appreciate the need for system documentation, including the general process as well as architecture and modeling tools
  - Poor communication between PMO and stakeholders
  - Political in-fighting
    - Among coordinating agencies
    - Among contractors
Best Practices That Could Have Made A Difference – 1

Test:

- Never “assume” anything about what others in the overall process may (or may not) have implemented
  - Always conduct at least some of the tests with actual inputs from other participants.
- Always include end-to-end tests – starting and ending with the user in the field
  - The proof is in the total flow, not in the smaller pieces that are often the basis for tests before full system test.
  - End-to-end use cases are key to this overall system understanding.
Best Practices That Could Have Made A Difference – 2

Process documentation:

- Document user processes
  - Undocumented user processes are problems just waiting to happen
  - Knowledge of end-to-end user processes is essential
  - May be documented as use cases or by other means
    - Thorough documentation of the complete process, covering the entire route from user submission through return of a response to a user
    - Include all user/coordinating agency processes

Proven development processes:

- Use disciplined acquisition and development processes
  - E.g., CMMI covers such topics as Lifecycle Models (in the Project Planning Process Area), Organizational Process Definition (OPD), Involve Relevant Stakeholders, and System Transition.
Best Practices That Could Have Made A Difference – 3

Requirements processes:

• Institute and respect a bona fide requirements generation and approval process
  • All parties participate
  • Documentation on all requirements is clear and shared
  • Requirements changes are controlled
  • Requirements are vetted through a proper approval process
Best Practices That Could Have Made A Difference – 3

System documentation:
• Government personnel need insight into every aspect of the system
  • End-to-end process flows
  • Architecture and design information
  • Implementation and test plans and results
• System documentation must be created and delivered to the government
  • Government personnel must know what to do with it
    • Technically qualified to
      • Ask the right questions
      • Assess the answers provided
    • Must be willing and able to act on their technical assessments
      • E.g., to decide whether to accept or reject a deliverable and justify that decision
Best Practices That Could Have Made A Difference – 4

Contractual vehicles:

• Contracts need to support:
  • Creation and delivery of system documentation
  • Holding the contractor(s) accountable for its content and quality
• Government personnel must be qualified to oversee them
  • Knowing when to defer to the contractor – and when not to
Best Practices That Could Have Made A Difference – 5

Stakeholder communication:
• Document relationships with coordinating agencies
  • Something akin to SLAs, MOAs, etc.
• Ensure that
  • They truly cover everything
  • Everyone honors them
Epilogue

The government’s response?

Once massive test failures were encountered, the Program responded with a classic set of Firefighting\textsuperscript{1} decisions

- Redirecting all personnel to getting to the bottom of the go-live problems
- Putting work on the next version of the system on hold
- Thus risking subsequent problems in the next version’s future

\textsuperscript{1} See \url{http://resources.sei.cmu.edu/asset_files/whitepaper/2008_019_001_29209.pdf} for more information on the Firefighting Archetype.
Questions?
Patricia Oberndorf
Principal Engineer
Software Engineering Institute
Phone: 412-973-3459
Email: po@sei.cmu.edu

Bryce Meyer
bmeyer@sei.cmu.edu

John Hawrylak
harlac@sei.cmu.edu

U.S. Mail
Software Engineering Institute
Customer Relations
4500 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2612
USA

Web
www.sei.cmu.edu
www.sei.cmu.edu/contact.cfm