

There is No Common Definition of Software Development Success

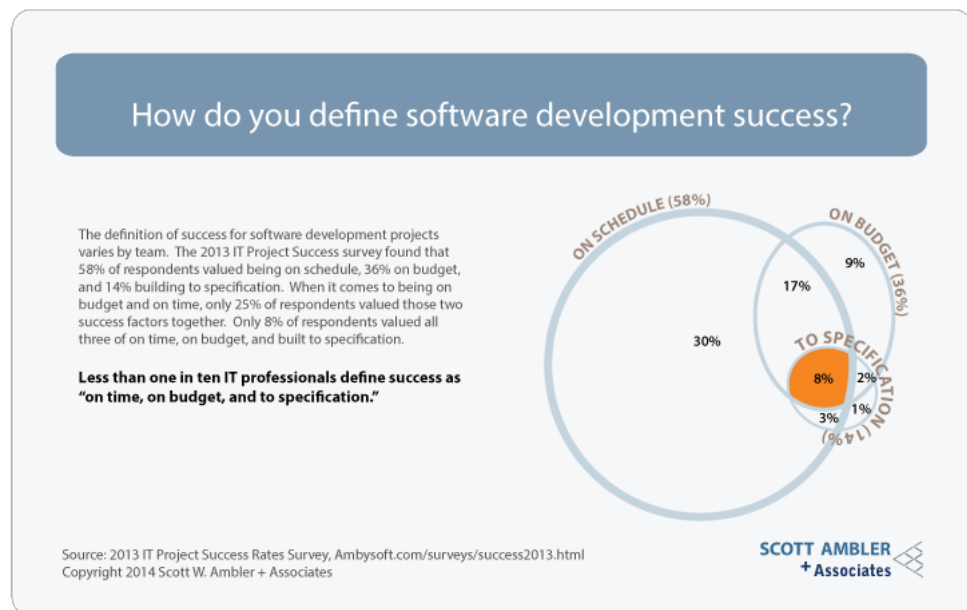
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When you read the project management literature you often see software development success defined as “on time, on budget, to specification.” This definition sounds reasonable, and on the surface it’s hard to argue with, but in practice it proves to be questionable at best. The problem with that definition of success is that it breaks what is referred to as the “iron triangle” which then results in a poor quality product being produced. Luckily, few software development teams seem to have this definition of success foisted upon them any more.

The interesting thing is that less than 10% of software development teams seem to have “on time, on budget, to specification” as their definition of success. How do we know this? Our [2013 IT Project Success Rates Survey](#) explored how people define success for software development teams. We did this by asking a series of questions in the format of “When it comes to X, do you value A, B, Both, or Neither”. For example, to explore how people value schedule-related issues, the choices were (A) “deliver when the solution is ready to be shipped” and (B) “deliver on schedule”. The following infographic summarizes how often people indicated that “on time”, “on budget”, or “to specification” (and any combination thereof) were of value to them:



Why is this important? Context counts. It is critical to recognize that your development teams may each have a set of success criteria that is unique to them. As a manager you will need to motivate, measure, and guide each team in a manner that reflects the success criteria under which they are working. As a team member you will need to work in a manner that reflects the context of the situation that you find yourself in. For example, a team working to a strict deadline will work differently than one where the goal is to deliver when the solution is ready to be shipped.

A related SA+A Insight is that when given a choice, people prefer agile over traditional success criteria. For more results from this survey, read the SA+A Insight [Comparing Software Development Paradigms](#).

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