Project software engineering: Failed ICT Projects The dutch police and BVH

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Basic facility Enforcement is the main program for the dutch police to administer (small) crimes. BVH is a program with a GUI, in constrast to its predescessor Xpol, which only had a commandline interface. When Xpol was replaced with BVH in 2009, the policemen in Holland expected a better, faster and easier program than Xpol. Was it not that the management had decided that BVH would not be a different program. Management had decided that developing a new program would cost to much (as cutbacks were being made in the force). Instead,the decision was made to build a GUI on a program that was already being called legacy (Xpol). The total development of the GUI and some (low quality) satelite programs took two years and around €16,000,000.- Not more than a year after the first release and training for every cop in Holland, a document to the minister of national affairs called the blackbook containing numerous complaints about the 'new' software. There are a few factors that made this project fail, but what are those factors, are there better approaches to the situations that were crossed during the development of BVH?

One of the first things one can spot on this project is the lack of communication between the management, who commissioned the project with vtsPN, and the end user, the dutch cops. As is read in the blackbook, the cops expected a better and faster new system. What actually was commissioned was a GUI build on the old systems a lot of the corps already used. This was done so all of the corps would use the same system, before a new system was commissioned. But instead of creating a system that was easy for all, a system was created that had a lot of difficulties. It crashed easily and asked a lot more than older forms would have done.

Therefore, we can easily say that the decisions about the new system were solely made by the management itself. During the development of the new system there was no feedback from the organisation to the developers. This due to the fact manangement made the decisions and commissioned the product without consulting the people who were gonna work with it.

The above two facts about the project, themselves lead to a project that is doomed to fail. Not asking users what they want, and not showing them during development what they are going to end up with always leads to wrong expectations. No matter how good the product is (which in the case of BVH it is not) with your customer having wrong expectations the product is wrong by definition. You end up with possibly great software, but an unsatisfied customer.

After the delivery of the product that was in no way deliberated with the customers that needed to use the system.[2] After the release, the unsatsifaction of the customer resulted in a lot of feedback. Now, if a system was programmed and designed well, changes to the system would not be a big problem. But with BVH, one request would go through an administrative and bureaucratic process of 9 days. Customers who give feedback have the feeling they are not heard thus the unsatisfaction grows.

Yet again this project fails to satisfy its customers. The lack of ability to respond to customer wishes on a quick manner leaves an even more disappointed client, who is unhappy with the system and feels misunderstood or not taken seriously when talking about change request. For a project to finish successfully, an organisation or team must be agile enough to change the direction of a project, for the good of the customer, as most of the projects that start development change from day to day.

For this project the source of the inability to change, next to the two points made earlier in this document, it is due to the unprofessionalism of the development team/company (vtsPN). Instead of creating a modular system that works as a whole, four different teams worked on different parts of the project. This is in no means bad, and is even considered to be unavoidable in some cases. But when a project is developed in such a way, there should be at least a slight notion of what is being done, and a few agreements about what to really do. In case of the vtsPN, they could have decided on one programming language. Inside the project at least four different programming languages. The code coverage within the project is very low and a lot of the code is copied code (i.e. not DRY).[1] Due to those points, maintaining and changing the code is a difficult operation. Several programming languages, a lot of legacy and a bureaucratic process to decide upon changes, plus the fact that doing a clean install of the system takes nine working days, make this project a real disaster.

All in all, even with the facts on paper, the commission that gives advice about this particular project[2], advices to manage the expectations and keep pushing more money in it instead of quiting and getting in business with a company that does know how to develop these kind of projects.

References

[1] Dr. ir. Joost Visser et alii, *BHV Software Risk Assesment Report*, Software improvement group

[2] Advies werkgroep gebruik basisvoorzieningen, “Om te begrijpen moet je goed luisteren“ Report made in response to the blackbook