The Dangers of Change Approval Processes

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The evolution of change management processes significantly influences the performance and stability of software delivery in modern organizations. Change approval processes, often viewed as essential for risk mitigation and compliance, can paradoxically impede performance, agility, and innovation. Many pitfalls are associated with the change approval process, and it can cause increased risk, inefficiency, and delays.

One of the fundamental dangers of traditional change approval processes is that they introduce significant delays. When approval is contingent upon external bodies, such as Change Advisory Boards (CABs) or upper management, the time required to execute changes can balloon, leading to inefficiencies in the software delivery pipeline (*Capabilities: Streamlining change approval*. DORA. 2019). Organizations relying on these heavyweight processes can have excessively long processing times for change requests, some stretching across months. This creates a bottleneck of waiting for approvals, hindering organizations from delivering timely updates and responding to customer needs.

The rigid bureaucratic nature of these processes can discourage team members from proposing necessary changes, resulting in a culture of fear and compliance rather than innovation (*Capabilities: Streamlining change approval*. DORA. 2019). Development teams can lose sight of their objectives as they navigate these lengthy processes while potentially risking low morale among the workforce. When developers perceive approvals as a cumbersome task rather than an enabler of progress, it can lead to reduced productivity and increased turnover.

Ironically, while change approval processes are intended to reduce risk, they can contribute to an increased risk profile for the organization. Systems that rely on formal approvals often fail to adapt swiftly to emerging challenges or bugs, resulting in potentially catastrophic delays in delivering essential fixes. As documented by DORA (DevOps Research and Assessment), organizations that operate with heavy change management processes exhibit worse software delivery performance and higher rates of change failure compared to their more agile counterparts.

By enforcing strict approval processes, organizations inadvertently promote a culture of compliance over practicality. This causes team members to focus on meeting approval criteria rather than considering the actual impact of changes. Misalignment on the team can push them toward implementing bigger, riskier changes less frequently, compared to smaller and faster releases that foster experimental learning and minimize the consequences of mistakes (Williams, 2024).

There is a growing call for more agile approaches to counter the inefficiencies and risks associated with traditional change approval processes. Emphasizing peer review processes and continuous integration as alternatives can streamline operations while still ensuring proper oversight. Research indicates that organizations that leverage peer reviews during development can achieve higher levels of quality control without the extensive delays inherent in traditional approval models (*Capabilities: Streamlining change approval*. DORA. 2019).

Incorporating automation further helps organizations catch errors early in the software progression cycle. Techniques such as continuous testing, integration, and delivery can shift the focus from external target-based approvals to internal checks and balances, allowing teams to act more autonomously. This improves their ability to deliver changes quickly while also adapting and learning from their experiences successfully.

​The dangers of change approval processes appear as inefficiencies, increased failure rates, and diminished innovation.​ A shift towards more agile practices is inevitable as traditional mechanisms struggle to keep pace with rapidly evolving environments. Organizations can overcome the inherent challenges of antiquated change approval systems by reprioritizing peer reviews, implementing automated solutions, and empowering development teams. This can enhance their overall performance and adaptability in an ever-changing landscape. Transitioning from rigid control to adaptive oversight is the key to unlocking the potential of modern software delivery practices, where a culture of continuous improvement and timely value delivery is fostered.

# References

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