

# Skunk Works Projects [closed]

Asked 16 years ago   Modified 15 years, 10 months ago   Viewed 2k times



12



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💡 This question does not appear to be about programming within the scope defined in the [help center](#).

Closed 5 years ago.

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**Skunk Works Project:** A project carried out by one part of a company without the knowledge of the remainder of the company.

Looking for stories about any skunk works projects you've worked on or initiated:

- Was it successful?
- Were you found out?
- Were you punished or rewarded?
- How did you fund it?
- How did you staff it?
- How long did it take to finish, compared to above-ground projects?

- What was the cost, compared to above-ground projects?
- Was it formally adopted?

project-management

skunk-works

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edited Feb 4, 2009 at 23:01

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2 revs, 2 users 100%

Patrick Cuff

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This is off-topic, and might fit better on another site – [David](#)  
Jul 19, 2015 at 2:08


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2 I'm voting to close this question as off-topic because it's not about programming. – [Michal](#) Jul 20, 2015 at 8:56

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2 I'm voting to close this question as off-topic because it is not about programming – [BDL](#) Sep 10, 2017 at 16:22

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4 I'm voting to close this question as off-topic because [you should only ask practical, answerable questions based on actual problems that you face. Chatty, open-ended questions diminish the usefulness of our site and push other questions off the front page. Avoid asking questions where every answer is equally valid.](#) – [EJoshuaS - Stand with Ukraine](#) Jun 26, 2019 at 16:38 

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## 8 Answers

Sorted by:

Highest score (default)



7



Excellent question. Very important question.

Geoffrey Moore (Inside the Tornado, Crossing the Chasm, etc.) has written that, as he lectured around the world, he had one question he would ask every client (including those like GE, Motorola, etc.)



The question was:



**"Can you give me even one example of a truly ground-breaking, paradigm shifting innovation that has ever come out of your company's research or product development process?"**

At least at the point where I read the quote, **not one example** had been identified. And in most cases, such products or services had been conceived, designed, and largely developed by small groups of people who at best were **ignored**, but were often **actively opposed** by R&D.

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answered [Dec 15, 2008 at 18:51](#)

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[dkretz](#)

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Any links to a source for this quote? – [Larsenal](#) Dec 15, 2008 at 18:56

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- 1 Links Schminks! We're not Wikipedia! I accept blind hyperbole as truth and communicate it thusly! – [Kieveli](#) Dec 15, 2008 at 19:07

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Don't want it for verification! I'm interested in reading more from this guy on the topic. – [Larsenal](#) Dec 15, 2008 at 19:28

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He actually wrote a series of articles on Innovation in some magazine or other. I think that's where I read it. I've got it saved somewhere here ... – [dkretz](#) Dec 15, 2008 at 19:34

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- 1 Can't find it offhand, but it was likely part of a series in the Stanford GSB magazine. The best source from him on this topic is probably his book Dealing with Darwin [dealingwithdarwin.com](http://dealingwithdarwin.com). Also see Top 10 Innovation Myths - [sandhill.com/opinion/editorial.php?id=66](http://sandhill.com/opinion/editorial.php?id=66) – [dkretz](#) Dec 16, 2008 at 3:07
- 



4

Not sure if this qualifies as a "skunk works" project, but here's a great story from [This American Life](#). It's Act Two of [this March 2005 episode](#).



Amy O'Leary tells the story of a software writer at Apple Computer whose job contract ends, but he refuses to go away. He continues to show up at work every day, sneaking in the front door, hiding out in empty offices, and putting in long hours on a project the company cancelled. There were no meetings, no office politics, no managers interfering with his work. Soon, he had written a perfect piece of software. His final problem is figuring out how to secretly install it in Apple's

new computers without anyone noticing. (12 minutes)

Great listening for anyone, but especially programmers in this case.

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answered Dec 15, 2008 at 19:09

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IIRC, this was the story of the graphical calculator application. – Joel Coehoorn Dec 15, 2008 at 19:12

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Yes. this is what I had remembered. great story. – MikeJ Dec 15, 2008 at 19:14

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That's like Skunk Works Xtreme! – Patrick Cuff Dec 15, 2008 at 20:07

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2



I have actually done a number of these "Secret" project type situations. Were they are not fully supported when started, and kept very secret. I'll discuss on of these along the lines of your questions.

Was it successful?



Yes, the system developed was put into place 3 years ago, and has been functioning ever since.



Were you found out?

Yes, it was discovered, and it was part of the overall plan.

Were you punished or rewarded?

With a working prototype we were rewarded, given the extra resources needed, and eventually the system was put into place for the entire company to use.

How did you fund it?

It was a development activity that was simply completed in down-time and personal time by various people.

How did you staff it?

See the above.

How long did it take to finish, compared to above-ground projects?

We did the entire thing in about 4 months, with dedicated resources a single person could have done it in about 2 months, or a team in about 3-4 weeks.

What was the cost compared to above-ground projects?

No cost, using down-time that was already "wasted" to be put to effective use. All existing infrastructure for the final incarnation was already there.

Was it formally adopted?

Yes, it is a solid part of the business plan now, and has been for over 3 years.

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[Mitchel Sellers](#)

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Two questions: What the app does? See the above.

– [IAdapter](#) Dec 15, 2008 at 19:08

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- 1 The application was a web based custom system for user viewing of secure information. – [Mitchel Sellers](#) Dec 15, 2008 at 20:58
- 

Several of these? You are envied. Can I work for you? ;D

– [dkretz](#) Dec 16, 2008 at 3:08

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It was really s string of good luck, and a lot of smooth talking on my part, as I was the one leading the efforts...

– [Mitchel Sellers](#) Dec 16, 2008 at 15:24

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**2**

We are currently in this situation, although, admittedly, the project will not have high visibility aspects - even though everyone will be eventually using it.



As part of a preparation to rebuild most of our enterprise applications, we have started developing an application framework that will be the basis for all of the replacement applications. We already have "bench projects" and "proof of concept" time that everyone is aware that we use to evaluate concepts. How it is different this time, though, is that we are actively developing a full project.



- **Was it successful?** - We have not rolled out the full framework yet, but since it is modular, have been rolling out pieces in the legacy applications. Most of these are focused on stability and reporting/logging concerns. So far, they have exceeded expectations, allowing us to react to issues more rapidly, as well as eliminating some previously recurring ones.
- **Were you found out?** - Well, this project has become one of the worst kept secrets I have ever seen. While there are quite a few people who have heard the name of the project thrown around a bit, I don't think anyone outside of a few of my developers and the testing team really know what it is about.
- **Were you punished or rewarded?** - We haven't considered either side of this, yet. Unless the framework would cause negative effects, I doubt we would be punished for it. However, even if it is a success, the reward will be that no one notices anything other than improved applications.
- **How did you fund it?** - Like mentioned before, bench time between other projects and inclusion in "proof of concept" work. I have also been putting some of my own personal time into it on my commute, since it will lay the groundwork for how all of my developers interact with the applications in the future.
- **How did you staff it?** - I started with a series of small proof of concepts within the legacy codebase as part of "maintaining" the applications. Going in



and fixing a defect often involved analytical steps on what could be done to prevent things from happening or improve the experience in the future. These were eventually extracted and refactored in their own assemblies, which became the beginning of the framework. We are now placing "covert" projects into our iterations that help flesh out these ideas through my developers, and we are now extracting and refactoring their efforts based upon the success of the implementation.

- **How long did it take to finish, compared to above-ground projects?** - Yet to be determined. Since this is not an official project, so far it has really cost nothing. Bench time and "proof of concept" work is standard inclusion. The fact that we are essentially creating something from this time instead of throwing it away is gravy.
- **What was the cost, compared to above-ground projects?** - Once again, yet to be determined. I imagine that the up-front cost will be relatively small compared to larger projects. Considering that this is a framework to contain commonly used extensions and improve the ability and quality of the developer to work efficiently, it will probably pay for itself before it is finished due to time-saving, improved practices, and reduction in defects.
- **Was it formally adopted?** - The developers have embraced the concept. My immediate management is chomping at the bit. My management peers are excited, if not a little confused on what it will do. The

measurement will be the success of the applications that are built off of the framework - which is some ways away still.

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answered Dec 15, 2008 at 19:00

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Joseph Ferris



2



I built a tool to validate schema changes to the target DB at work. prior to my tool we did it all by hand with fugly scripts that DBA's at client sites had to run. my tool started tracking the structure of the database to know if certain things would work out. I got frustrated with having to hand check all this stuff or suffer from the errors inevtiabile in doing things by hand so I built my validator and here is its story...

**Was it successful?**

Yes

**Were you found out?**

yes. Part of the aspect of a skunk works project is that it has to surface eventually.

**Were you punished or rewarded?**

Punished initially - why not work on mainstream activities. But rewarded once the benefit was made evident and product errors were reduced. Then it was heralded- everyone loves a winner.

### **How did you fund it?**

For the love of coding it up and making my life easier - so no direct funds needed. Unless was part of managements plan to have a secret project i cannot see how this would be otherwise.

### **How did you staff it?**

I coded alone as a lone developer on a grassy knoll with my laptop.

### **How long did it take to finish, compared to above-ground projects?**

Not comparable. my skunksworks effort was maybe a year of tinkering. If we had set out to do it directly i cant imagine it would have taken less than 2 months directly but I do not know since thats not how it morphed. Downtime to think and plan may have made it faster in the end compared direct planning upfront.

### **What was the cost, compared to above-ground projects?**

Undetermined - As I mentioned, given that I had down time to think and plan it was able to evolve in the direction I wanted without schedule/result pressures. In a shorter

or more resource involved project we probably would have made some mistakes in rushin to get to some M1, M2 etc. Besides if it didnt work out, its would have been as if it had never happened as I could have folded up the tents and gone quietly into the night.

### Was it formally adopted?

My project is a key part of the product build at my work so I would say its entrenched.

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edited Dec 15, 2008 at 19:21

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2 revs

MikeJ



Hmm... I did one of these today actually.

2



We've got no real backup system in place. At present I get the highly enjoyable task of backing up 100GB of SVN repositories using svn hotcopy and .tar.gz files, while trying to juggle them across two or three NFS



shares with limited disk space to get to the server with the backup disk. That's in the best case - i.e. when I can be bothered to babysit the process for 2 hours.



Since that's bound to end in catastrophe sooner or later I did a `git svn clone` on the largest one straight onto the backup server, then cloned that to my own machine and

kicked out the svn working copy I was using. I've gained about 1GB of free space on my machine, given the most important backups some redundancy, and reduced a 15 minute `svn st` to a 30 second `git status`. And will I get complained at for it? Probably...

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answered Dec 15, 2008 at 19:53

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[user42092](#)

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Update: Make that "Probably" a "Yes". *sigh* – user42092 Jan 29, 2009 at 20:00

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2

Generally the answers here have been success stories, so I thought I'd share my recent experience sitting just outside such a project that did not go so well.



### **How did you fund it? How did you staff it?**



The project started when my manager identified a potential employee, lets call him Fred, who had a pet project in our field. We don't pay well, and they they agreed that Fred would be hired and would work almost full time on the project, which they would eventually introduce to the business.

So Fred's started work on the project, known only to Fred's team but not to management or other parts of the

business. Fred is a developer, and the work was more-or-less pure development, plus contributions to an underlying open-source project.

### **Was it successful?**

Not really. Fred was working on it alone, and I think would have spent 12-18 months on it. Progress reports to the team consisted of describing whatever bug he was fixing that week. Occasional attempts were made to interest one or two higher-ups in the organization, but they never really went anywhere. Fred was supposed to put together a plan to finish and roll out the project so it could be introduced to the organization, but there always seemed to be some reason it was never done.

### **Were you found out?**

Word slowly filtered out as Fred and the manager tried to interest more people in what they were doing.

Eventually we got restructured, and our new director wanted to know what everyone was working on, and the project was revealed to him. However, it was apparently not explained very well, since the new director wound up asking me (and others in our team I am sure) what exactly Fred's project was?

### **Were you punished or rewarded?**

Eventually the new director froze all funding for the project and Fred was reassigned to work on other

projects. That's the current status as far as I know.

**How long did it take to finish, compared to above-ground projects? Was it formally adopted?**

It was not finished and it was not adopted.

**What was the cost, compared to above-ground projects?**

The ostensible cost was Fred's time.

However, there were other costs.

First, Fred and his project became a bit of a joke in our team, and later in the teams we work with. What was he doing? Why was he doing it? Why was there no progress? Fred's reputation suffered. "Fred's project" became an in-joke for a project that was going nowhere.

Second, the eventual revelation of such a long-running but hidden project reflected poorly on our manager, and by extension on our whole team.

Third, resentment grew. Why was this guy working on his pet project when there was so much real work to be done? We are a small but busy team and we could have used a developer on any number of other projects.

In the end, I think this project has had consequences for our team's standing and dynamic. I occasionally talk it over with team members, when we're away from the office. Initially (and at the time) we were very critical of

Fred, who can be an irritating guy, and who does not take criticism well, and who promised something he couldn't deliver. More recently, we've been critical of our boss. This was not a good way to run a project, and it was obvious from very early on that Fred did not have the skillset to do this work on his own and he would not seek or take advice. It was unfair to Fred that he was put in that position and left in it for so long. Lately I have wondered if I should have raised my concerns more forcefully. Though we did push Fred and our manager on what the project was and where it was going, we did not take it any further than our team. Having said that, I cannot imagine a good outcome even if we had.

Finally, I'd like to say that Fred is a smart guy and the project was not a bad one. It could have been successful (some parts have since come out in competing projects -- inferior competitors that actually delivered).

If this project had been done above board, and Fred had been working with a decent project manager and had a good communicator on the team, it could well have found a champion and delivered something great. Either that or it could have been killed a lot sooner.

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answered [Dec 17, 2008 at 9:32](#)

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[Anon Gordon](#)

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I did one of these. It's actually how I ended up programming.

1



I was responsible for maintaining a legacy, er... "database". I won't go into gory details but it was the usual evil application. The company pretty much ran on it, it would sometimes go down for days. At the time the IS director (a friend) was actively looking for replacements, talking to large consulting organizations, etc.etc. but management was committed/emotionally invested in the existing system. I volunteered (to the IS director) to try to rewrite it (well, more like he asked if anyone was interested in trying to deal with this mess and I volunteered because I was bored). We had no real programmers on staff, and I'd only written a few small ad-hoc things. I had no idea how little I knew.



Finished the thing in about 8 months or maybe a year (this was a while ago, don't remember exactly).

**Was it successful?** yes, worked as advertised.

**Were you found out?** It initially started as a sort of super-secret, cloak and dagger thing. Kind of silly in retrospect, but it made it more fun. About halfway through it just started to become more obvious that that was what I was doing, and as it turned out the idea was supported. Writing this thing eventually became my job.

**Were you punished or rewarded?** Rewarded

**How did you fund it? / How did you staff it?** The success of it was pretty much due to the support of my boss, who made sure I had the time and resources I needed to do it.

**Was it formally adopted?** Yes, we eventually ran the company on it.

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answered [Dec 15, 2008 at 20:22](#)

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[Steve B.](#)

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