

PROCESS AND TECHNICAL DEBT

Christian Kaestner

Required Reading:

- Sculley, David, Gary Holt, Daniel Golovin, Eugene Davydov, Todd Phillips, Dietmar Ebner, Vinay Chaudhary, Michael Young, Jean-Francois Crespo, and Dan Dennison. "[Hidden technical debt in machine learning systems](#)." In Advances in neural information processing systems, pp. 2503-2511. 2015.

Suggested Readings:

- Fowler and Highsmith. [The Agile Manifesto](#)
- Steve McConnell. Software project survival guide. Chapter 3
- Pfleeger and Atlee. Software Engineering: Theory and Practice. Chapter 2
- Kruchten, Philippe, Robert L. Nord, and Ipek Ozkaya. "[Technical debt: From metaphor to theory and practice](#)." IEEE Software 29, no. 6 (2012): 18-21.
- Patel, Kayur, James Fogarty, James A. Landay, and Beverly Harrison. "[Investigating statistical machine learning as a tool for software development](#)." In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, pp. 667-676. 2008.

LEARNING GOALS

- Contrast development processes of software engineers and data scientists
- Outline process conflicts between different roles and suggest ways to mitigate them
- Recognize the importance of process
- Describe common agile practices and their goals
- Understand and correctly use the metaphor of technical debt
- Describe how ML can incur reckless and inadvertent technical debt, outline common sources of technical debt

CASE STUDY: REAL-ESTATE WEBSITE

The screenshot shows the Zillow homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for "Buy", "Rent", "Sell", "Home Loans", and "Agent finder". The Zillow logo is prominently displayed in the center. To the right of the logo are links for "Manage Rentals", "Advertise", "Help", and "Sign in". Below the navigation bar is a large, semi-transparent image of a house at dusk or night, with lights on in the windows. Overlaid on this image is the text "Reimagine home" in a large, white, serif font. Below this, a smaller text says "We'll help you find a place you'll love." At the bottom of the page is a search bar with the placeholder text "Enter an address, neighborhood, city, or ZIP c..." followed by a blue magnifying glass icon.

ML COMPONENT: PREDICTING REAL ESTATE VALUE

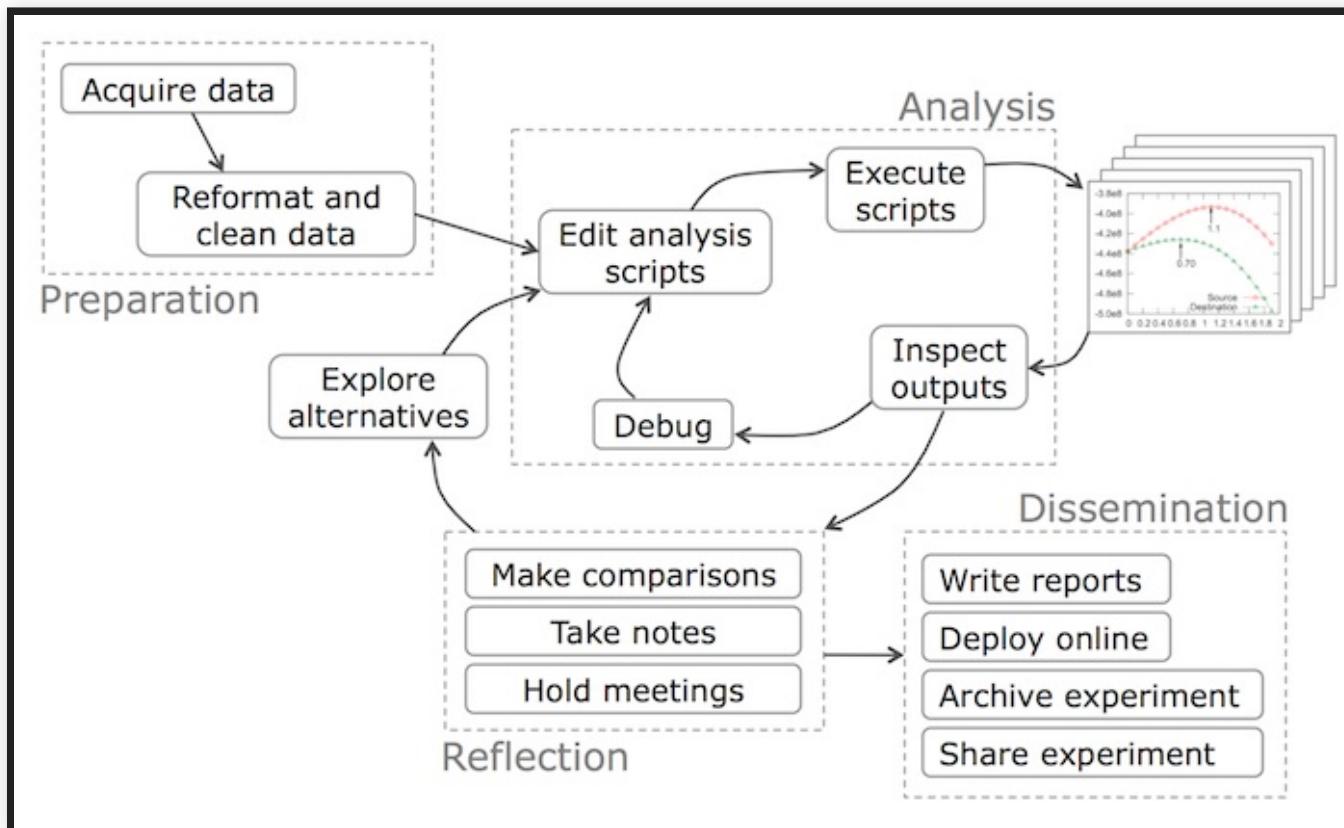
Given a large database of house sales and statistical/demographic data from public records, predict the sales price of a house.

$$f(\text{size}, \text{rooms}, \text{tax}, \text{neighborhood}, \dots) \rightarrow \text{price}$$

The image shows a screenshot of a Zillow real estate listing. At the top left is the Zillow logo. To its right are three blue action buttons: "Edit", "Save", and "Share". Below the header, the listing details are displayed: "3 bd | 1 ba | 2,090 Square Feet" and the address "541 S Graham St, Pittsburgh, PA 15232". Underneath the address, there is a status indicator "● Off market" followed by "Zestimate®: \$384,287" and "Rent Zestimate®: \$2,195/mo". A dashed horizontal line separates this information from the bottom section. The bottom section features the text "Est. refi payment: \$2,102/mo" next to a blue circle containing a white dollar sign (\$). To the right of this text is a blue button with the white text "Get current rates".

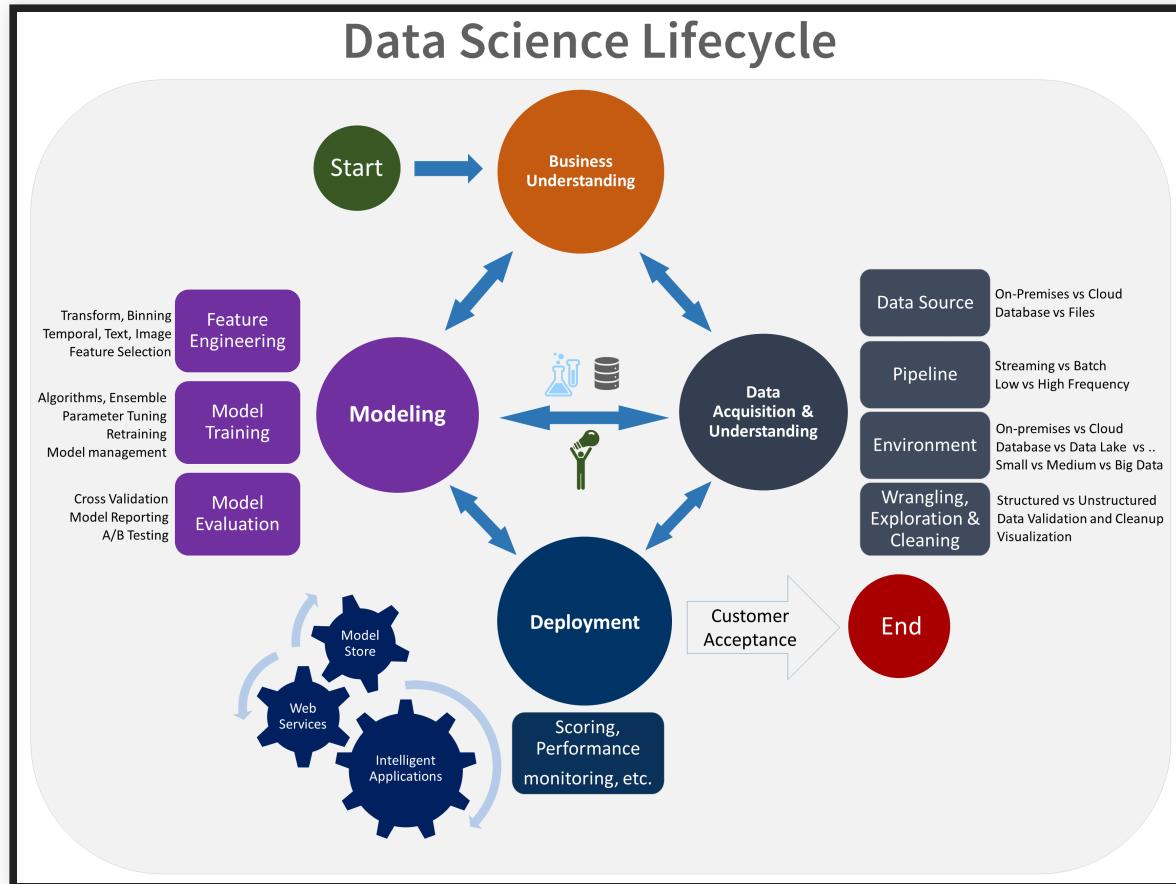
DATA SCIENCE: ITERATION AND EXPLORATION

DATA SCIENCE IS ITERATIVE AND EXPLORATORY



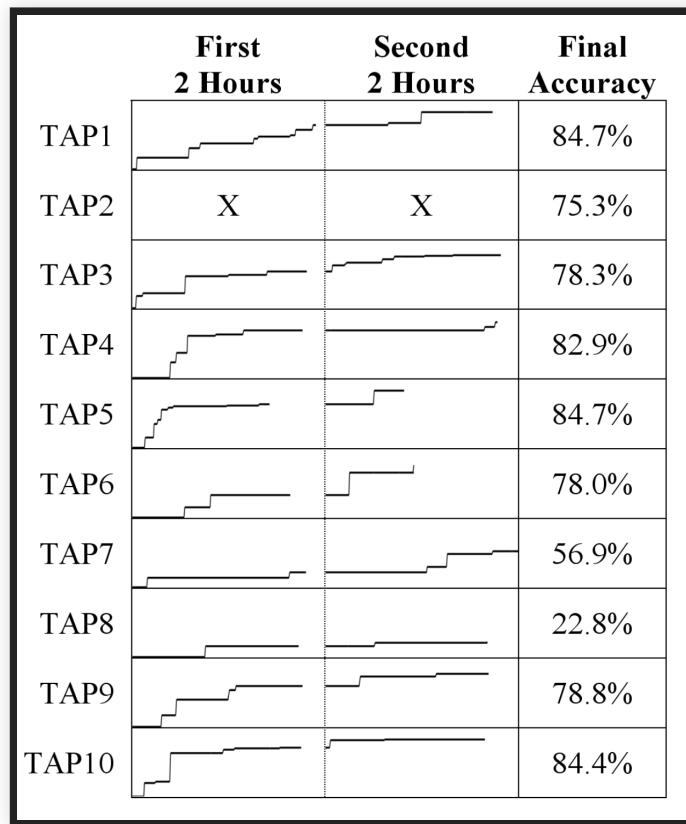
(Source: Guo. "[Data Science Workflow: Overview and Challenges](#)." Blog@CACM, Oct 2013)

DATA SCIENCE IS ITERATIVE AND EXPLORATORY



(Microsoft Azure Team, "[What is the Team Data Science Process?](#)" Microsoft Documentation, Jan 2020)

DATA SCIENCE IS ITERATIVE AND EXPLORATORY



Source: Patel, Kayur, James Fogarty, James A. Landay, and Beverly Harrison.
["Investigating statistical machine learning as a tool for software development."](#) In
Proc. CHI, 2008.

Speaker notes

This figure shows the result from a controlled experiment in which participants had 2 sessions of 2h each to build a model. Whenever the participants evaluated a model in the process, the accuracy is recorded. These plots show the accuracy improvements over time, showing how data scientists make incremental improvements through frequent iteration.

DATA SCIENCE IS ITERATIVE AND EXPLORATORY

- Science mindset: start with rough goal, no clear specification, unclear whether possible
- Heuristics and experience to guide the process
- Try and error, refine iteratively, hypothesis testing
- Go back to data collection and cleaning if needed, revise goals

SHARE EXPERIENCE?



COMPUTATIONAL NOTEBOOKS

- Origins in "literal programming", interleaving text and code, treating programs as literature (Knuth'84)
- First notebook in Wolfram Mathematica 1.0 in 1988
- Document with text and code cells, showing execution results under cells
- Code of cells is executed, per cell, in a kernel
- Many notebook implementations and supported languages, Python + Jupyter currently most popular

The screenshot shows a Jupyter Notebook cell with the following content:

```
# load data collected from team1
import pandas as pd

url = 'http://128.2.25.78:8080/private/log1.clean'
df = pd.read_csv(url)
df.head()
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Below the code, the resulting DataFrame is displayed:

dayIdx	user	userAvgTime	location	dow	isWeekend	time
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```

Speaker notes

- See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literate_programming
- Demo with public notebook, e.g., https://colab.research.google.com/notebooks/mlcc/intro_to_pandas.ipynb

NOTEBOOKS SUPPORT ITERATION AND EXPLORATION

- Quick feedback, similar to REPL
- Visual feedback including figures and tables
- Incremental computation: reexecuting individual cells
- Quick and easy: copy paste, no abstraction needed
- Easy to share: document includes text, code, and results

BRIEF DISCUSSION: NOTEBOOK LIMITATIONS AND DRAWBACKS?



SOFTWARE ENGINEERING PROCESS

INNOVATIVE VS ROUTINE PROJECTS

- Like data science tasks, most software projects are innovative
 - Google, Amazon, Ebay, Netflix
 - Vehicles and robotics
 - Language processing, Graphics, AI
- Routine (now, not 20 years ago)
 - E-commerce websites?
 - Product recommendation? Voice recognition?
 - Routine gets automated -> innovation cycle

A SIMPLE PROCESS

1. Discuss the software that needs to be written
2. Write some code
3. Test the code to identify the defects
4. Debug to find causes of defects
5. Fix the defects
6. If not done, return to step 1

SOFTWARE PROCESS

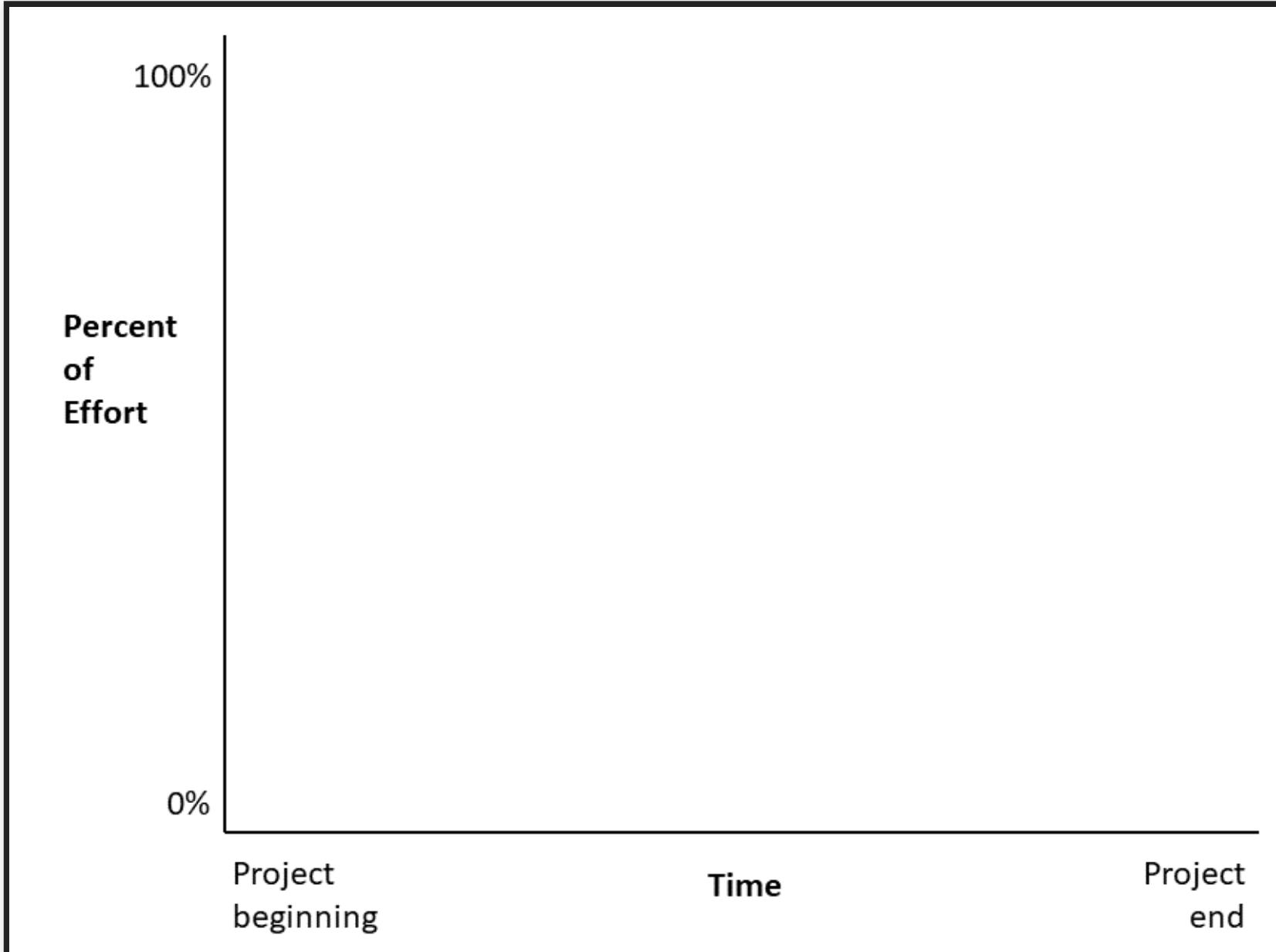
“The set of activities and associated results that produce a software product”

Examples?



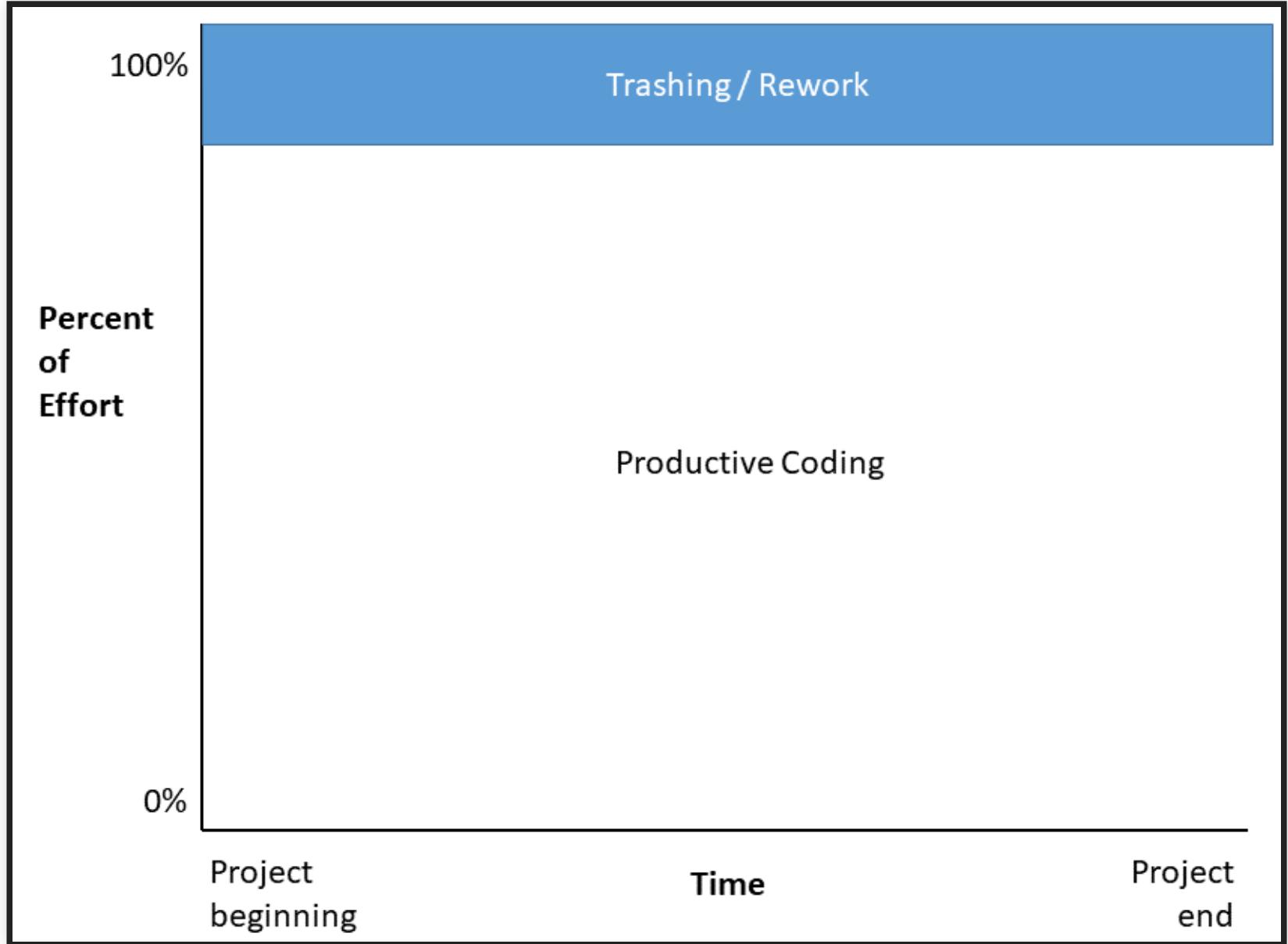
Speaker notes

Writing down all requirements
Require approval for all changes to requirements
Use version control for all changes
Track all reported bugs
Review requirements and code
Break down development into smaller tasks and schedule and monitor them
Planning and conducting quality assurance
Have daily status meetings
Use Docker containers to push code between developers and operation



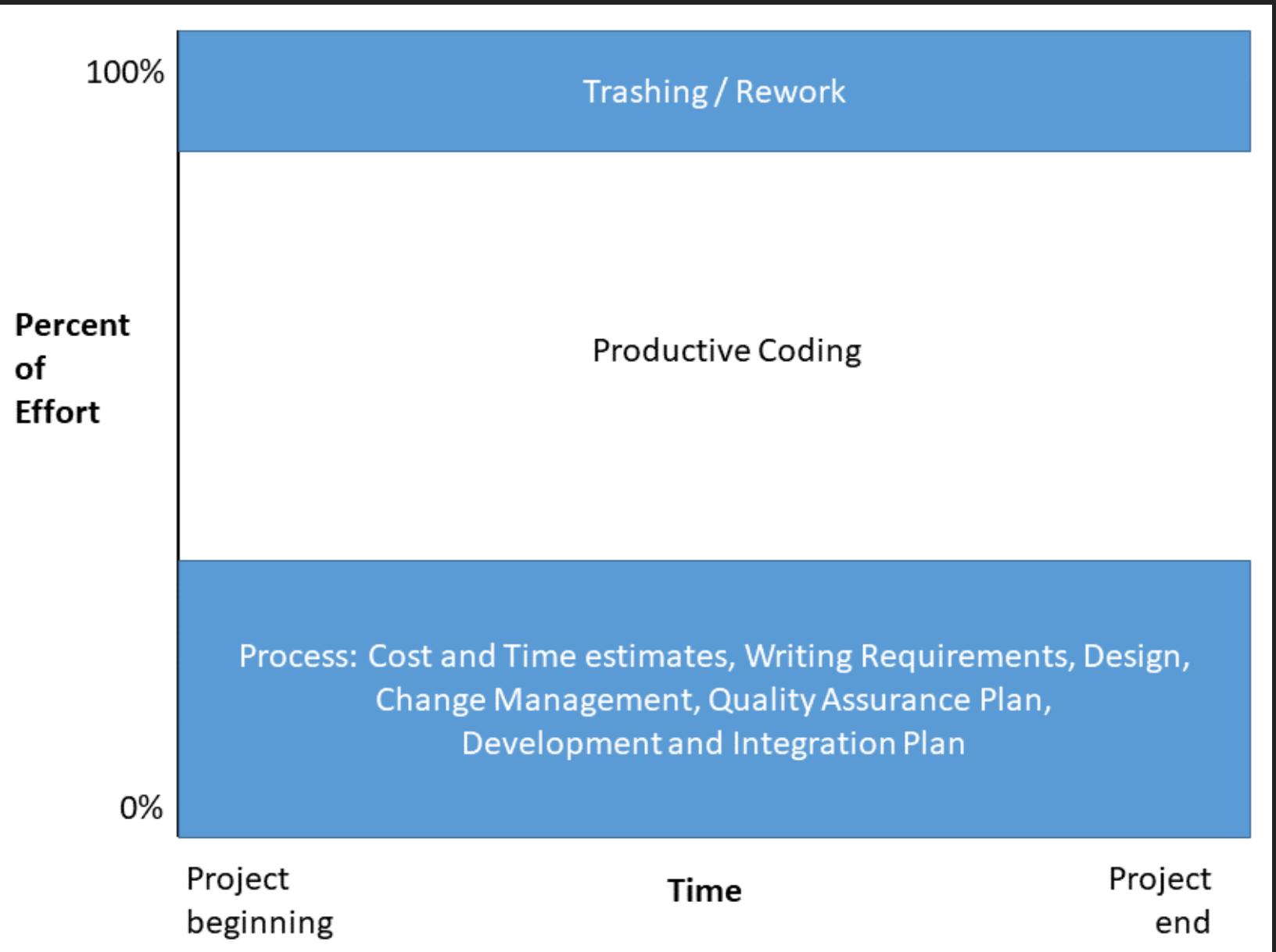
Speaker notes

Visualization following McConnell, Steve. Software project survival guide. Pearson Education, 1998.



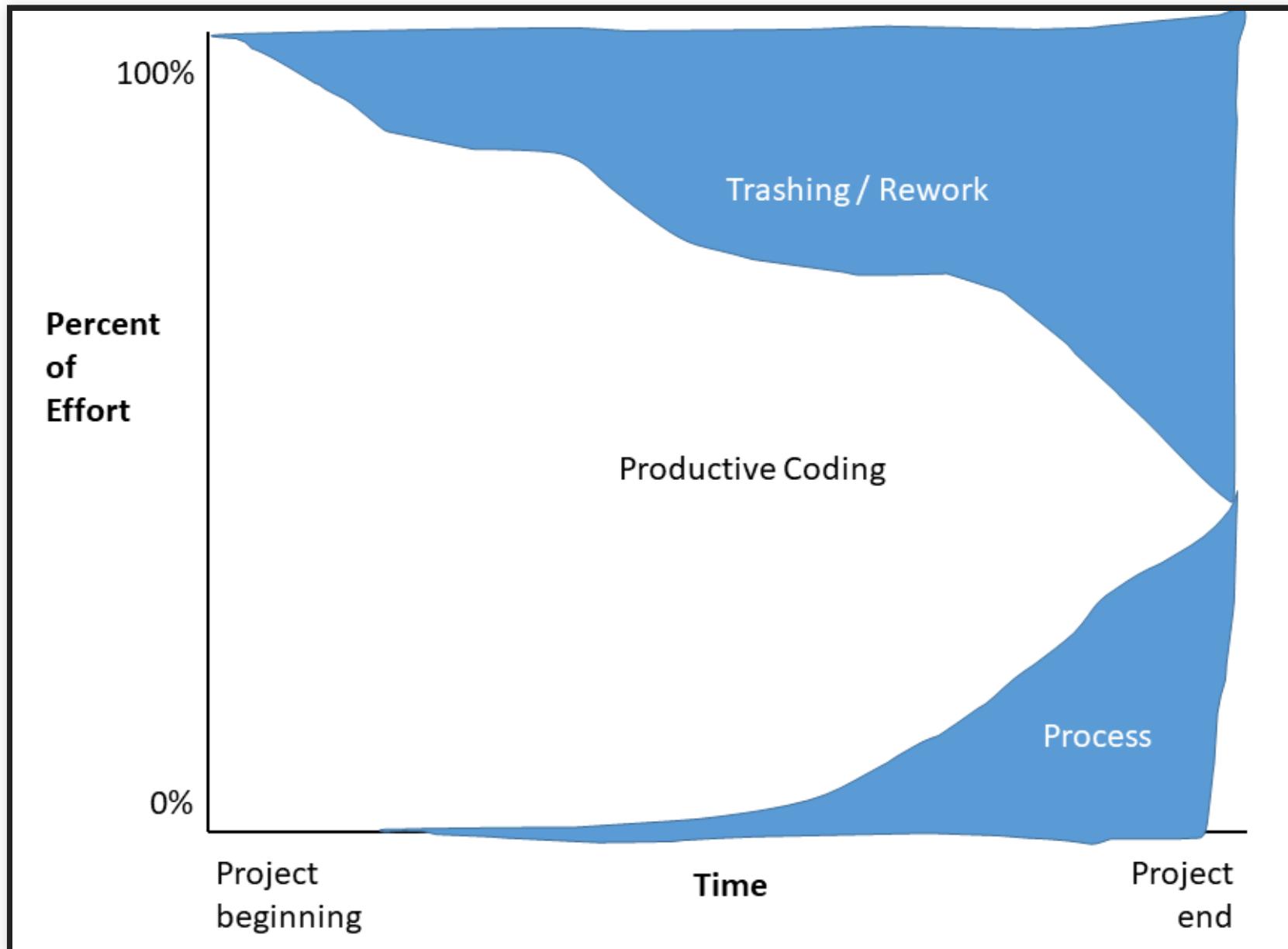
Speaker notes

Idea: spent most of the time on coding, accept a little rework



Speaker notes

negative view of process. pure overhead, reduces productive work, limits creativity



Speaker notes

Real experience if little attention is payed to process: increasingly complicated, increasing rework; attempts to rescue by introducing process

EXAMPLE OF PROCESS PROBLEMS?



Speaker notes

Collect examples of what could go wrong:

Change Control: Mid-project informal agreement to changes suggested by customer or manager. Project scope expands 25-50%
Quality Assurance: Late detection of requirements and design issues. Test-debug-reimplement cycle limits development of new features. Release with known defects.
Defect Tracking: Bug reports collected informally, forgotten
System Integration: Integration of independently developed components at the very end of the project. Interfaces out of sync.
Source Code Control: Accidentally overwritten changes, lost work.
Scheduling: When project is behind, developers are asked weekly for new estimates.

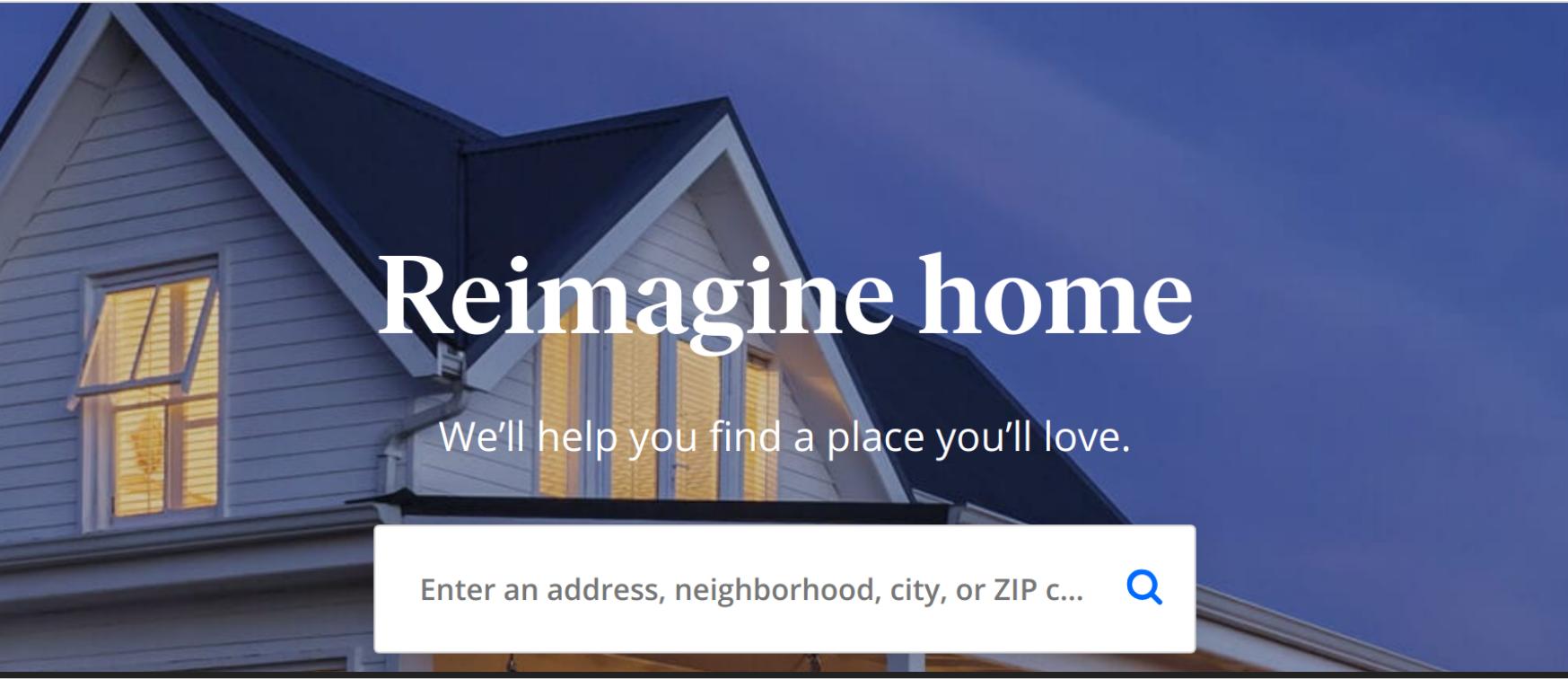
TYPICAL PROCESS STEPS (NOT NECESSARILY IN THIS ORDER)

- Understand customers, identify what to build, by when, budget
- Identify relevant qualities, plan/design system accordingly
- Test, deploy, maintain, evolve
- Plan, staff, workaround

Buy Rent Sell Home Loans Agent finder



Manage Rentals Advertise Help Sign in



Reimagine home

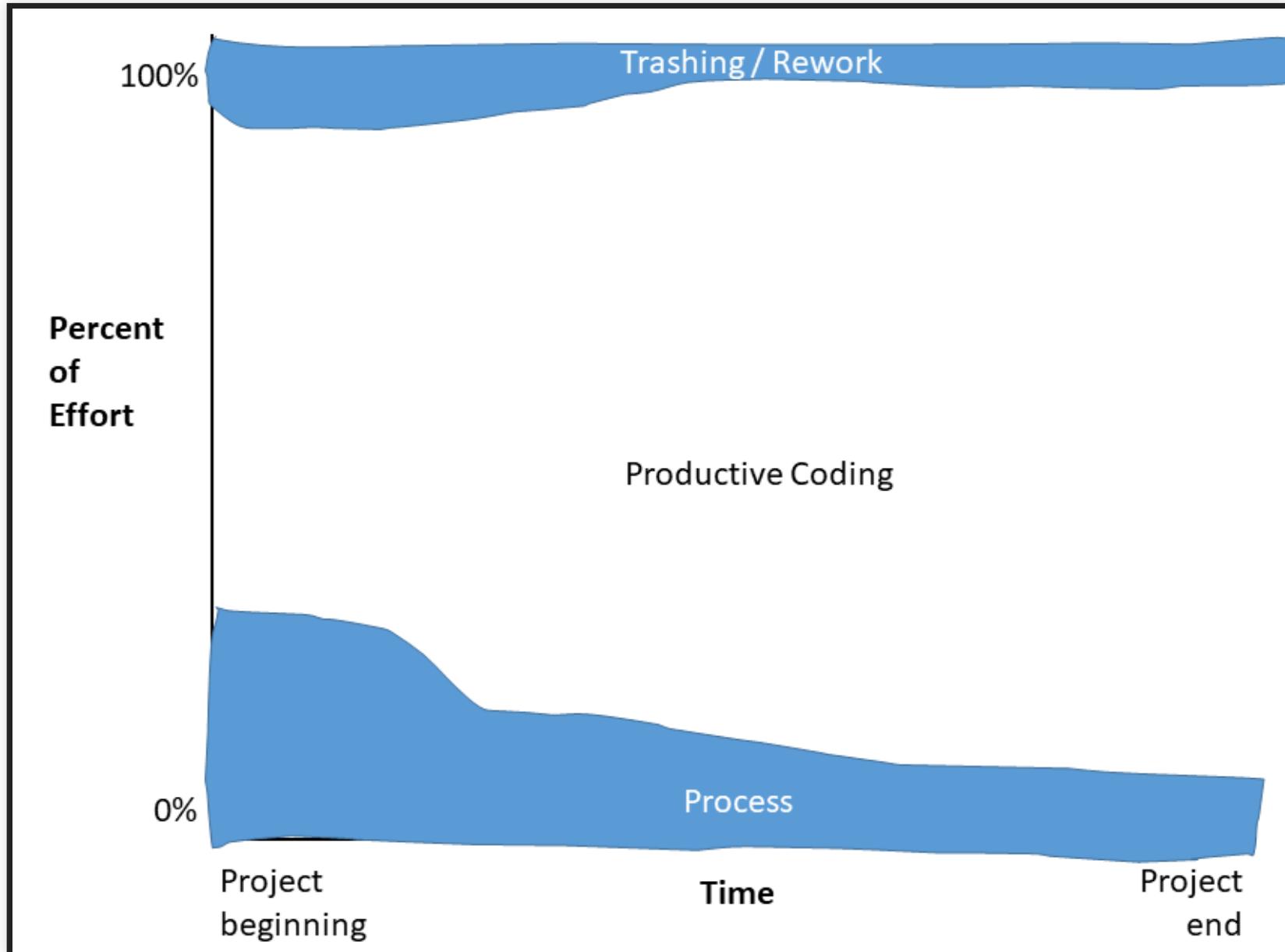
We'll help you find a place you'll love.

Enter an address, neighborhood, city, or ZIP c... 

SURVIVAL MODE

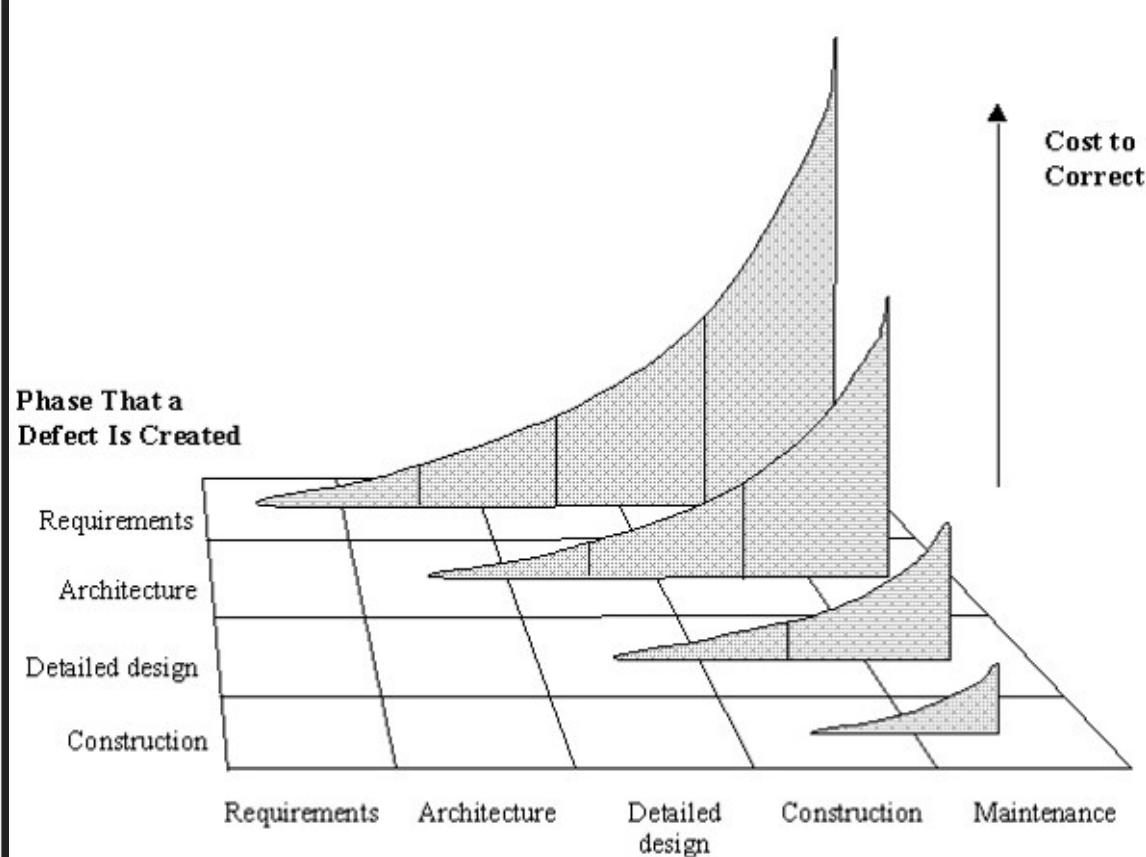
- Missed deadlines -> "solo development mode" to meet own deadlines
- Ignore integration work
- Stop interacting with testers, technical writers, managers, ...

Hypothesis: Process increases flexibility and efficiency + Upfront investment for later greater returns



Speaker notes

ideal setting of little process investment upfront

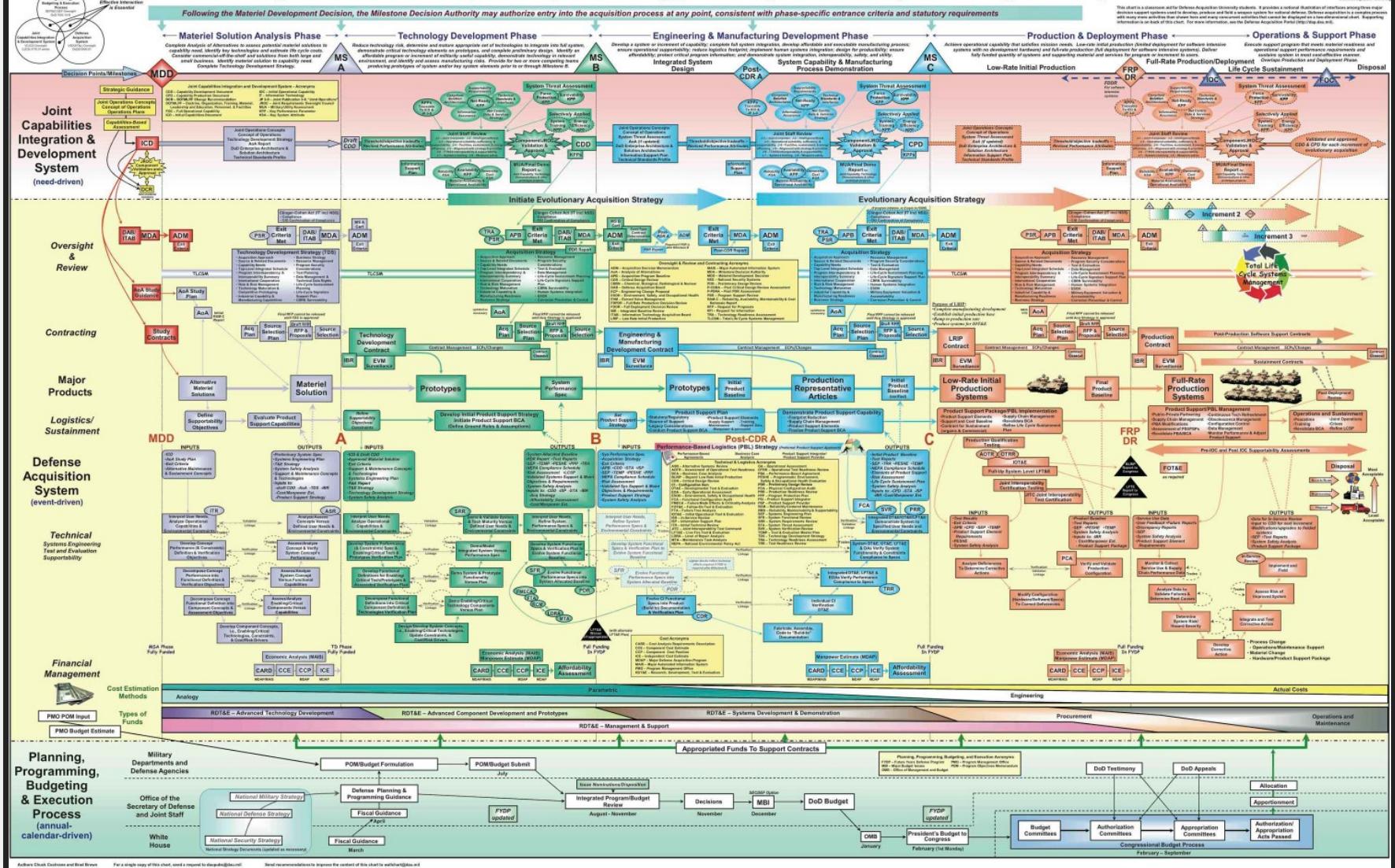


Copyright 1998 Steven C. McConnell. Reprinted with permission from *Software Project Survival Guide* (Microsoft Press, 1998).

Speaker notes

Empirically well established rule: Bugs are increasingly expensive to fix the larger the distance between the phase where they are created vs where they are corrected.

Integrated Defense Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics Life Cycle Management System



Speaker notes

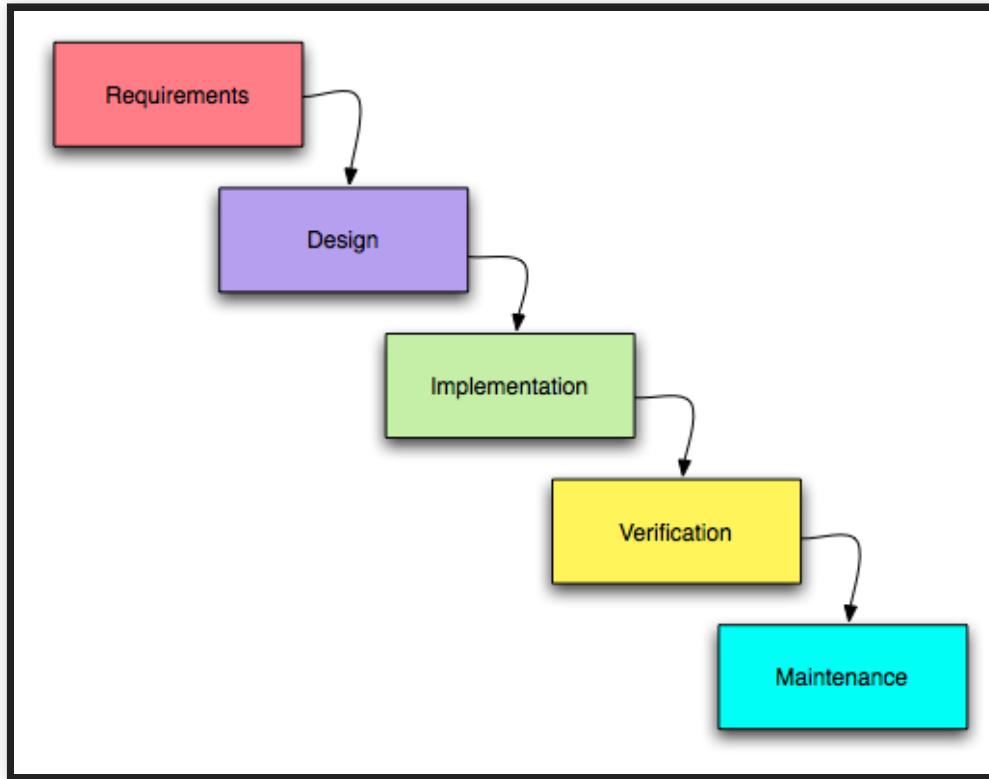
Complicated processes like these are often what people associate with "process". Software process is needed, but does not need to be complicated.

SOFTWARE PROCESS MODELS

AD-HOC PROCESSES

1. Discuss the software that needs to be written
2. Write some code
3. Test the code to identify the defects
4. Debug to find causes of defects
5. Fix the defects
6. If not done, return to step 1

WATERFALL MODEL



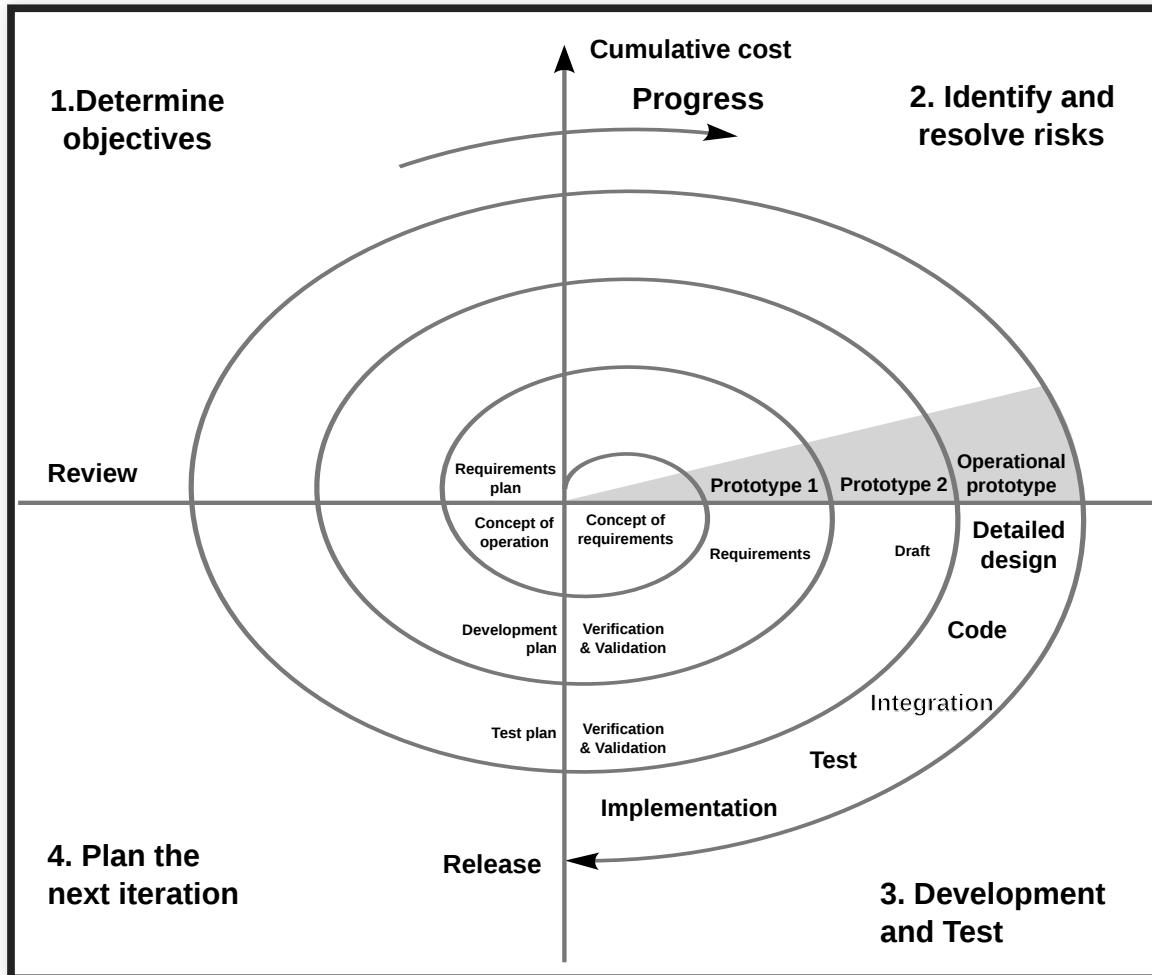
taming the chaos, understand requirements, plan before coding, remember testing

(CC-BY-SA-2.5)

Speaker notes

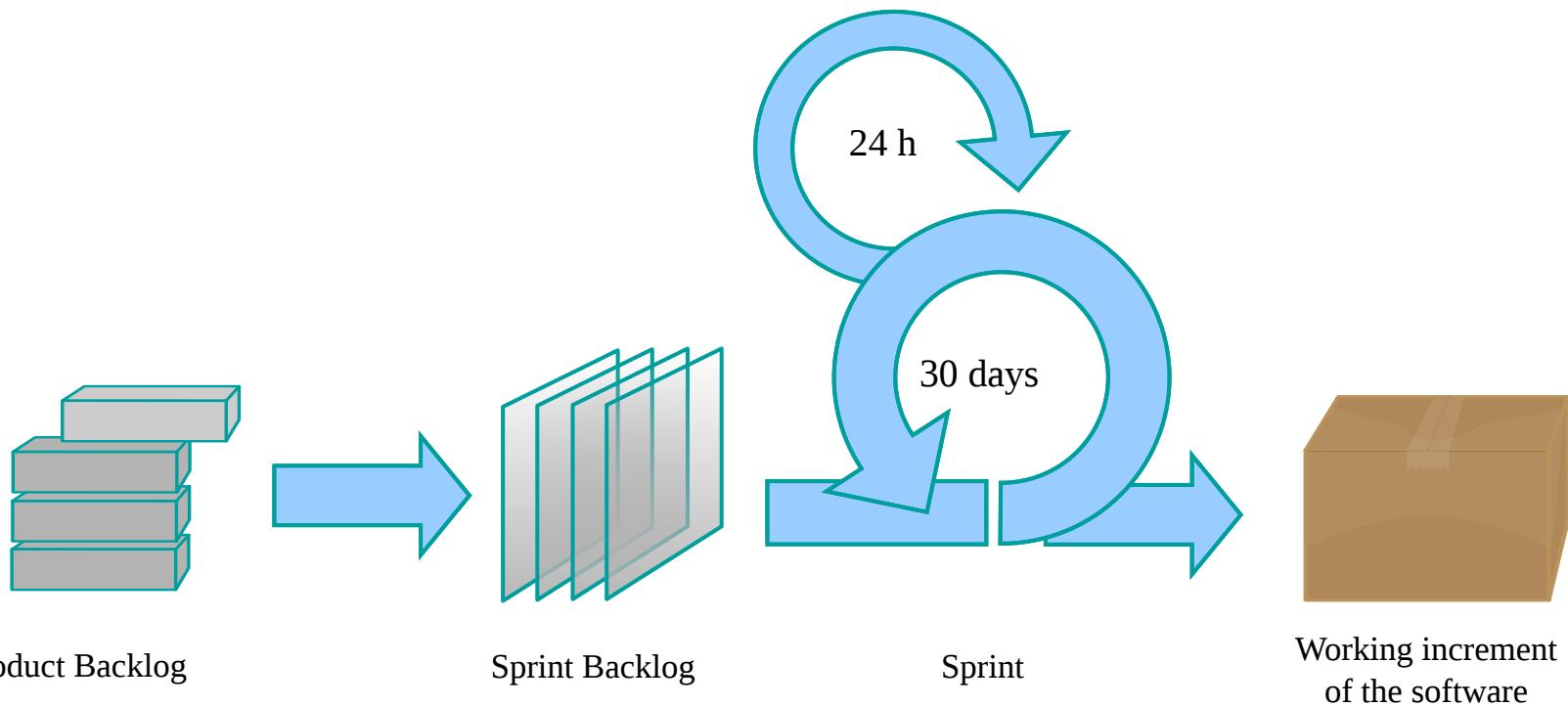
Although dated, the key idea is still essential -- think and plan before implementing. Not all requirements and design can be made upfront, but planning is usually helpful.

RISK FIRST: SPIRAL MODEL



incremental prototypes, starting with most risky components

CONSTANT ITERATION: AGILE

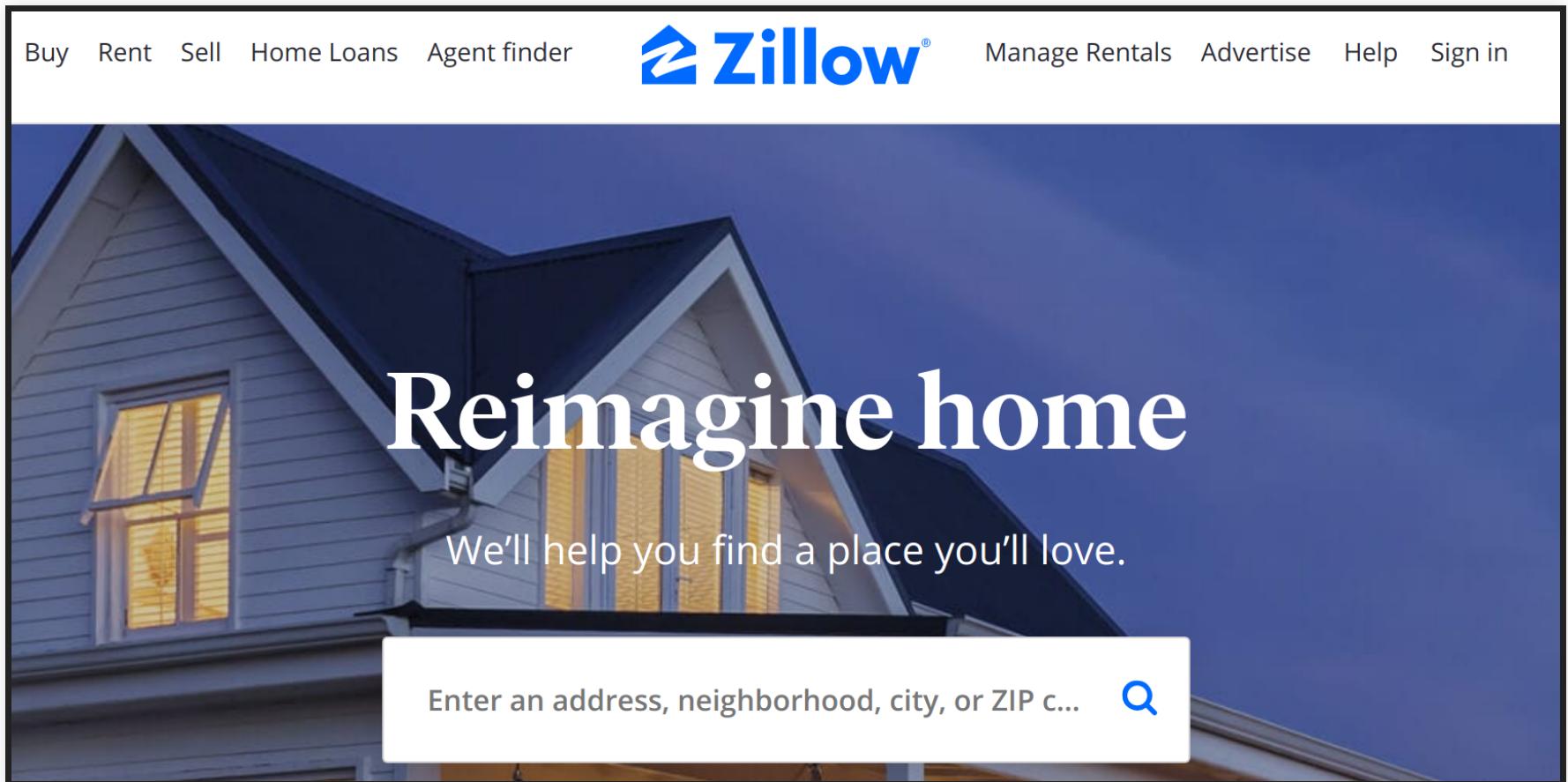


working with customers, constant replanning

(CC BY-SA 4.0, Lakeworks)

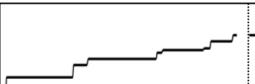
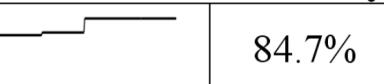
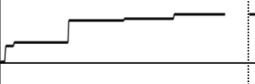
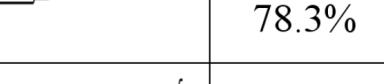
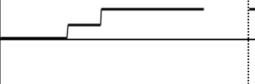
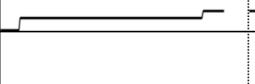
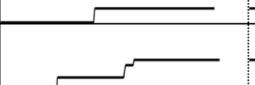
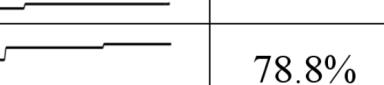
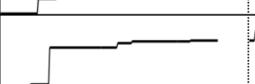
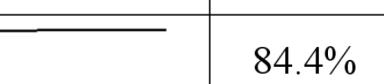
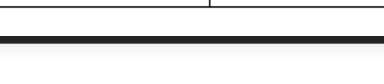
CONTRASTING PROCESS MODELS

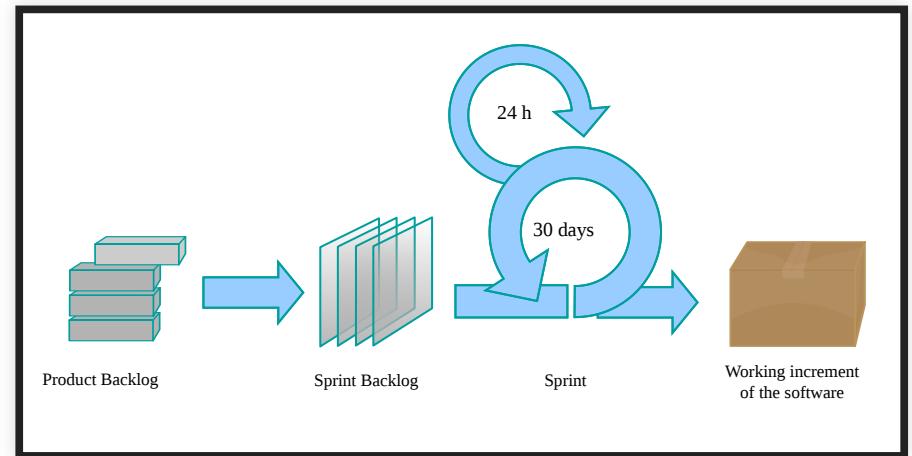
Ad-hoc -- Waterfall -- Spiral -- Agile

A screenshot of the Zillow website homepage. The top navigation bar includes links for 'Buy', 'Rent', 'Sell', 'Home Loans', 'Agent finder', the 'Zillow' logo, 'Manage Rentals', 'Advertise', 'Help', and 'Sign in'. The main visual is a photograph of a house at dusk or night, with the text 'Reimagine home' overlaid in large white letters. Below this, a subtitle reads 'We'll help you find a place you'll love.' A search bar at the bottom contains the placeholder text 'Enter an address, neighborhood, city, or ZIP c...' followed by a magnifying glass icon.

DATA SCIENCE VS SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

DISCUSSION: ITERATION IN NOTEBOOK VS AGILE?

	First 2 Hours	Second 2 Hours	Final Accuracy
TAP1			84.7%
TAP2	X	X	75.3%
TAP3			78.3%
TAP4			82.9%
TAP5			84.7%
TAP6			78.0%
TAP7			56.9%
TAP8			22.8%
TAP9			78.8%
TAP10			84.4%



(CC BY-SA 4.0, Lakeworks)

Speaker notes

There is similarity in that there is an iterative process, but the idea is different and the process model seems mostly orthogonal to iteration in data science. The spiral model prioritizes risk, especially when it is not clear whether a model is feasible. One can do similar things in model development, seeing whether it is feasible with data at hand at all and build an early prototype, but it is not clear that an initial okay model can be improved incrementally into a great one later. Agile can work with vague and changing requirements, but that again seems to be a rather orthogonal concern. Requirements on the product are not so much unclear or changing (the goal is often clear), but it's not clear whether and how a model can solve it.

POOR SOFTWARE ENGINEERING PRACTICES IN NOTEBOOKS?



A screenshot of a Jupyter Notebook cell. The code cell contains:# load data collected from team1
import pandas as pd

url = 'http://128.2.25.78:8080/private/log1.clean'
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dayIdx          user  userAvgTime  location  dow  isWeekend      time
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Data was preprocessed externally, identifying the time at a given day when the light was first turned on (12pm). Weather and sunrise information is not included here, though that'd be important. If the light was off this morning (quite common), 0 is recorded.

```
[ ] # just data encoding and splitting X and Y

X = df.drop(['time'], axis=1)
YnonZero = df['time'] > 0
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from sklearn import preprocessing
# leDate = preprocessing.LabelEncoder()
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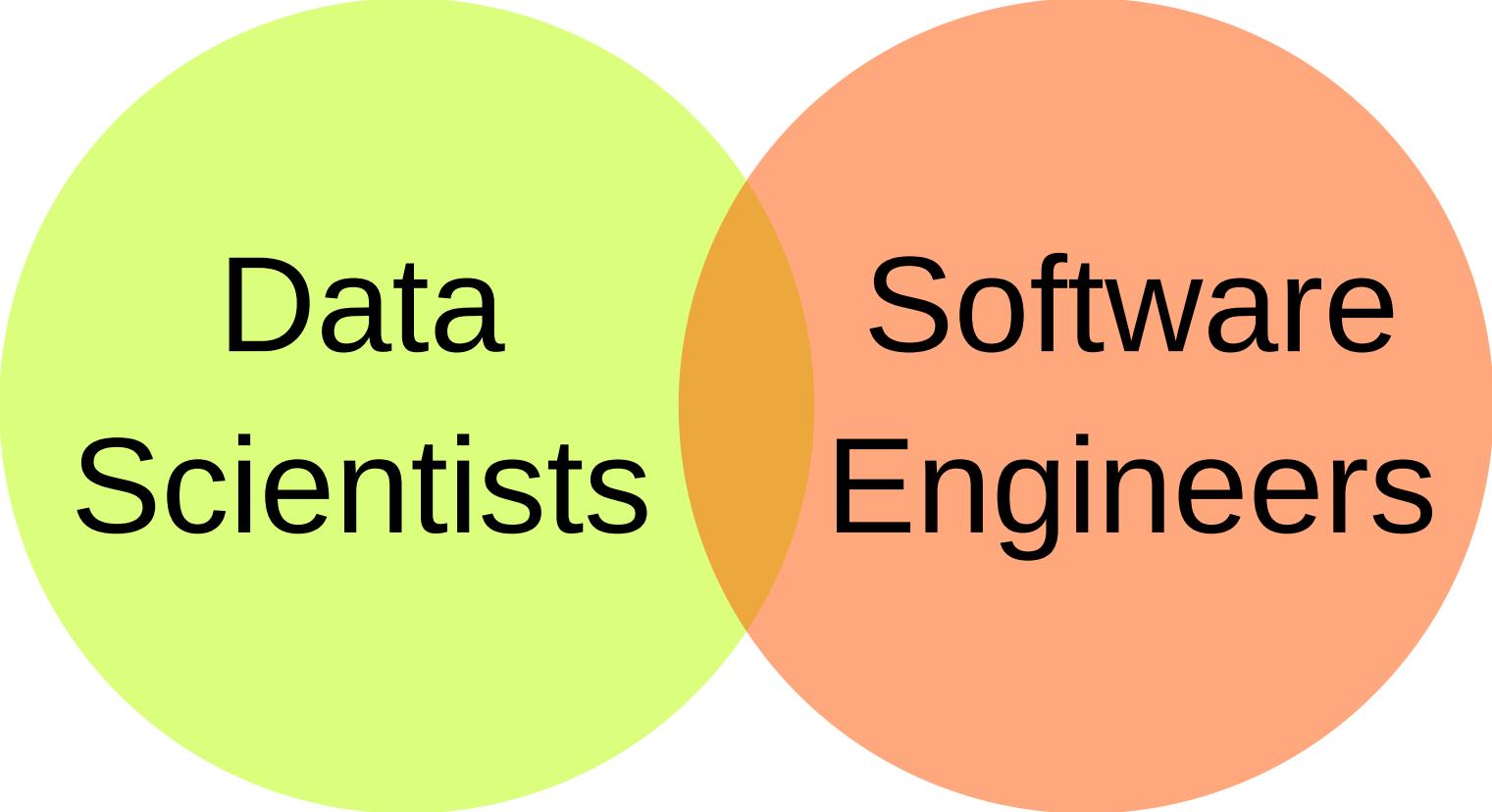
X=X.apply(preprocessing.LabelEncoder().fit_transform)
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```

*

- Little abstraction
- Global state
- No testing
- Heavy copy and paste
- Little documentation
- Poor version control
- Out of order execution
- Poor development features (vs IDE)

UNDERSTANDING DATA SCIENTIST WORKFLOWS

- Instead of blindly recommended "SE Best Practices" understand context
- Documentation and testing not a priority in exploratory phase
- Help with transitioning into practice
 - From notebooks to pipelines
 - Support maintenance and iteration once deployed
 - Provide infrastructure and tools



A Venn diagram consisting of two overlapping circles. The left circle is light green and contains the text "Data Scientists". The right circle is light orange and contains the text "Software Engineers". The two circles overlap in the center.

Data
Scientists

Software
Engineers

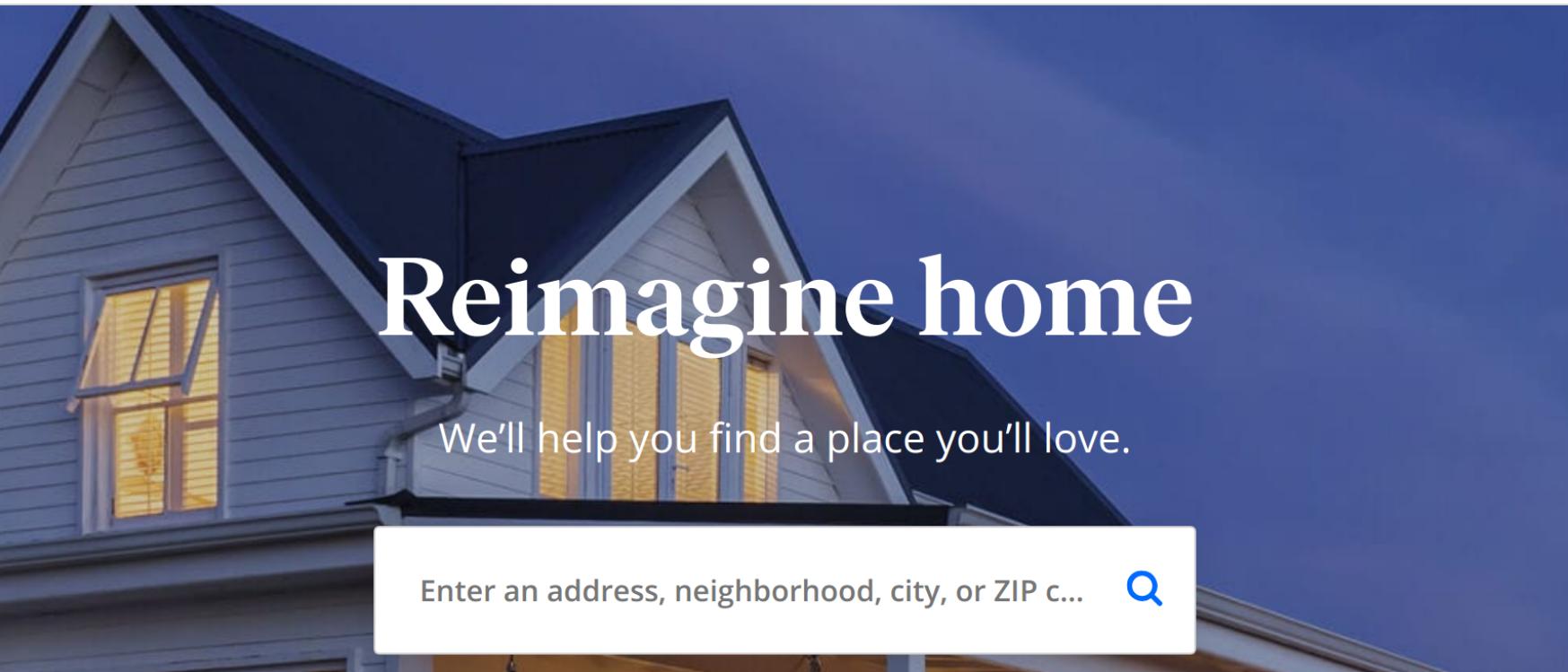
PROCESS FOR AI-ENABLED SYSTEMS

- Integrate Software Engineering and Data Science processes
- Establish system-level requirements (e.g., user needs, safety, fairness)
- Inform data science modeling with system requirements (e.g., privacy, fairness)
- Try risky parts first (most likely include ML components; ~spiral)
- Incrementally develop prototypes, incorporate user feedback (~agile)
- Provide flexibility to iterate and improve
- Design system with characteristics of AI component (e.g., UI design, safeguards)
- Plan for testing throughout the process and in production
- Manage project understanding both software engineering and data science workflows
- No existing "best practices" or workflow models

Buy Rent Sell Home Loans Agent finder



Manage Rentals Advertise Help Sign in



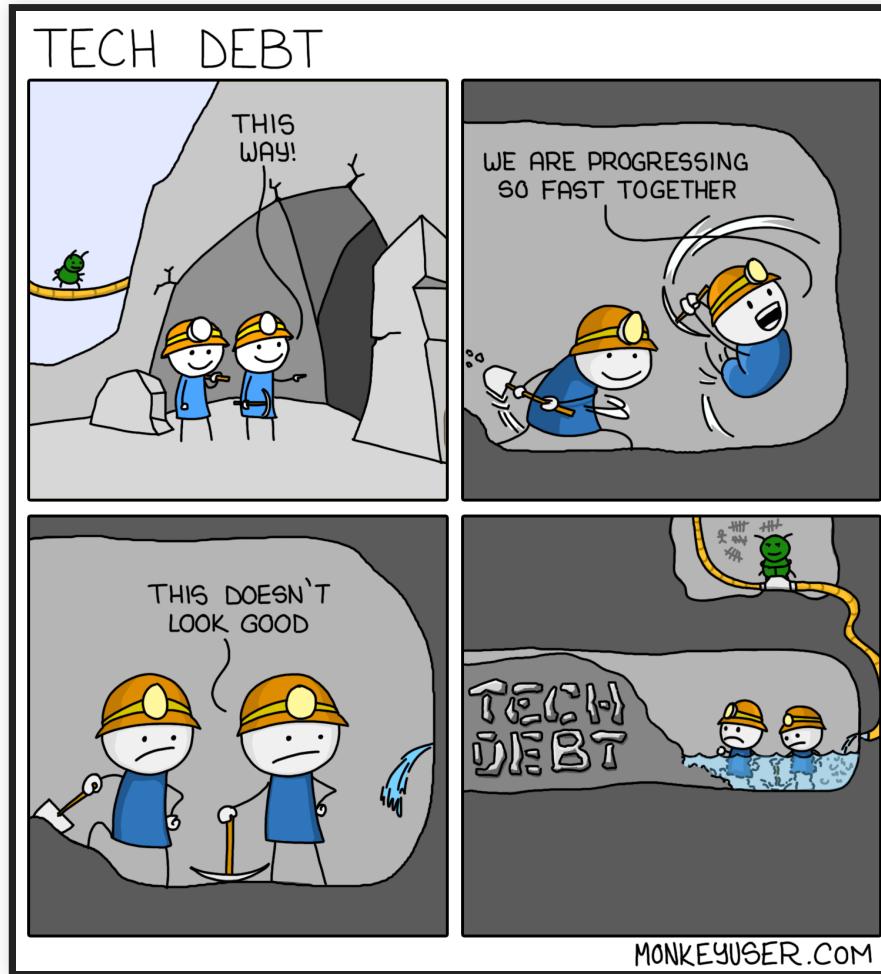
Reimagine home

We'll help you find a place you'll love.

Enter an address, neighborhood, city, or ZIP c...



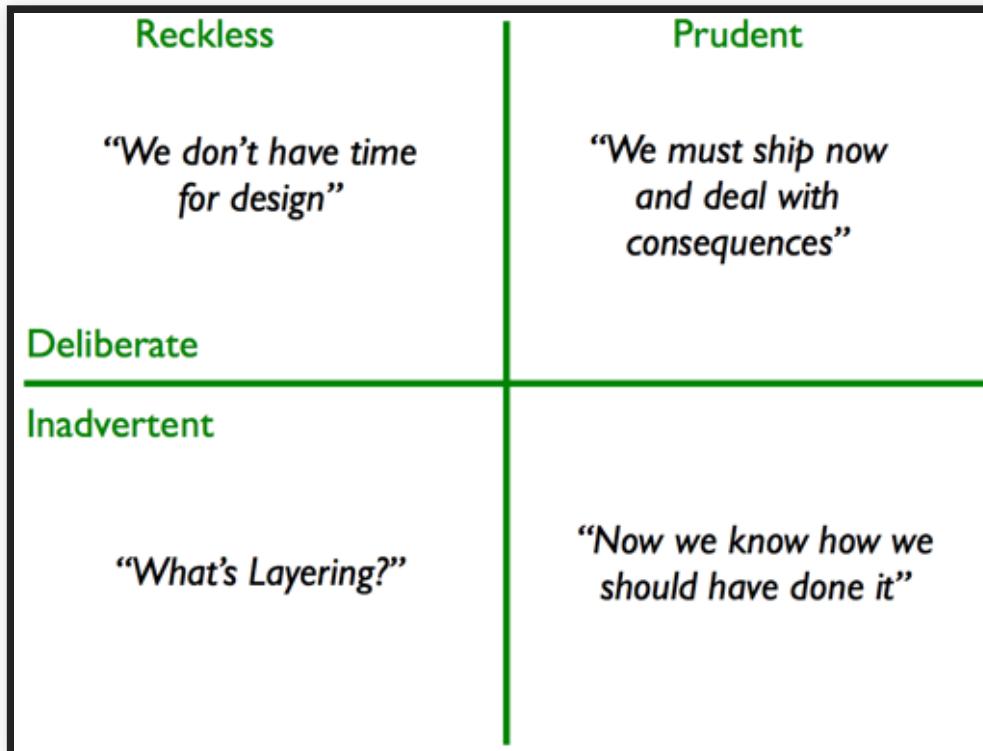
TECHNICAL DEBT



TECHNICAL DEBT METAPHOR

- Analogy to financial debt
 - Have a benefit now (e.g., progress quickly, release now)
 - accepting later cost (loss of productivity, e.g., higher maintenance/operating cost, rework)
 - debt accumulates and can suffocate project
- Ideally a deliberate decision (short term tactical or long term strategic)
- Ideally track debt and plan for paying it down

Examples?



Source: Martin Fowler 2009,
<https://martinfowler.com/bliki/TechnicalDebtQuadrant.html>

TECHNICAL DEBT FROM ML COMPONENTS?

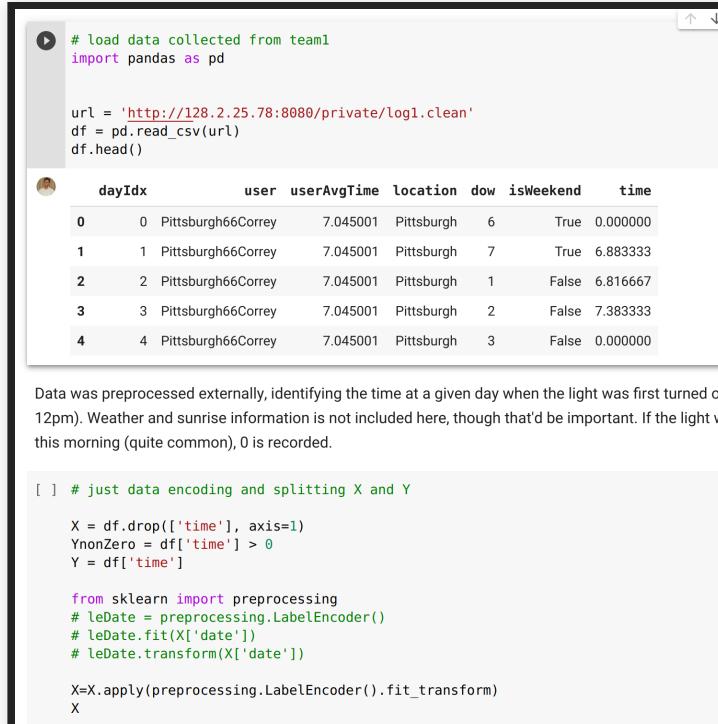


(see reading)

Sculley, David, et al. [Hidden technical debt in machine learning systems](#). Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems. 2015.

THE NOTEBOOK

Jupyter Notebooks are a gift from God to those who work with data. They allow us to do quick experiments with Julia, Python, R, and more -- John Paul Ada



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Speaker notes

Discuss benefits and drawbacks of Jupyter style notebooks

ML AND TECHNICAL DEBT

- Often reckless and inadvertent in inexperienced teams
- ML can seem like an easy addition, but it may cause long-term costs
- Needs to be maintained, evolved, and debugged
- Goals may change, environment may change, some changes are subtle
- Example problems
 - Systems and models are tangled and changing one has cascading effects on the other
 - Untested, brittle infrastructure; manual deployment
 - Unstable data dependencies, replication crisis
 - Data drift and feedback loops
 - Magic constants and dead experimental code paths

Further reading: Sculley, David, et al. [Hidden technical debt in machine learning systems](#). Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems. 2015.

CONTROLLING TECHNICAL DEBT FROM ML COMPONENTS



CONTROLLING TECHNICAL DEBT FROM ML COMPONENTS

- Avoid AI when not needed
- Understand and document requirements, design for mistakes
- Build reliable and maintainable pipelines, infrastructure, good engineering practices
- Test infrastructure, system testing, testing and monitoring in production
- Test and monitor data quality
- Understand and model data dependencies, feedback loops, ...
- Document design intent and system architecture
- Strong interdisciplinary teams with joint responsibilities
- Document and track technical debt
- ...

SUMMARY

- Data scientists and software engineers follow different processes
- ML projects need to consider process needs of both
- Iteration and upfront planning are both important, process models codify good practices
- Deliberate technical debt can be good, too much debt can suffocate a project
- Easy to amount (reckless) debt with machine learning

