

The Standish Report: Does It Really Describe a Software Crisis?

Reconsidering the relevancy of a frequently cited report on software project failures.

There has been plenty of discussion over the last several decades about something called “the software crisis.” Those who speak of such a crisis claim software projects are always over budget, behind schedule, and unreliable.

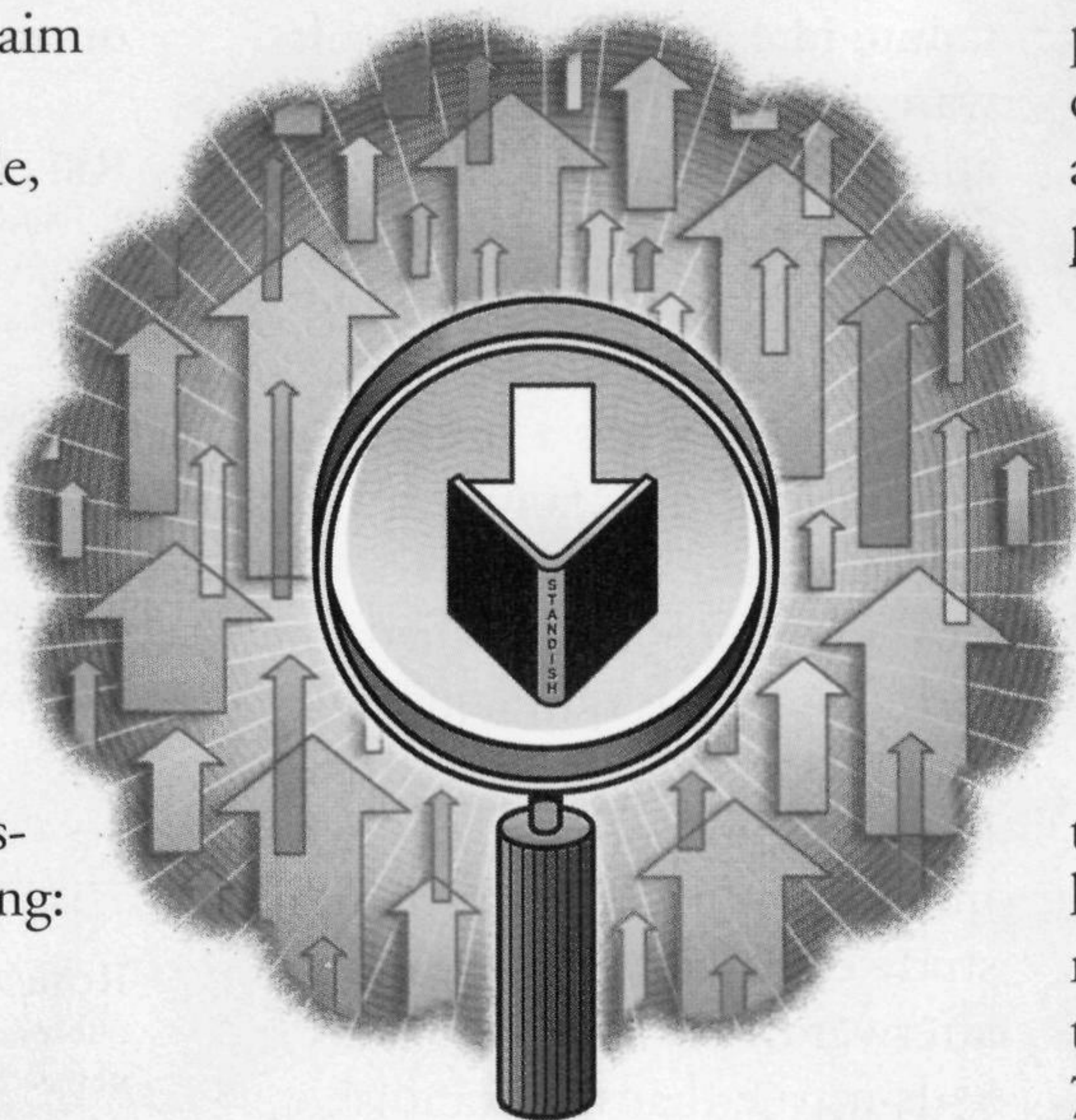
The software crisis thinking represents a damning condemnation of software practice. The picture it paints is of a field that cannot be relied upon to produce valid products.

But it is important to step back and ask some questions about this crisis thinking:

- Does it represent reality?
- Is it supported by research findings?

In this column, I want to make the point that, based on answers to these questions, there is something seriously flawed in software crisis thinking. The reality is, I would assert, that we are in the midst of what sociologists might

call the computing era—an era that would simply not be possible were it not for plentiful successful



software projects. Does that reality suggest the software field is really in crisis? Not according to my way of thinking.

Specifically, I want to address that second question, the one about research findings. At first glance, there are plenty of publi-

cations that conclude there really is such a crisis. Many academic studies assert the software crisis is the reason behind the concept the particular study is advocating, a concept that is intended to address and perhaps solve this purported crisis. Software gurus often engage in the same kind of advocacy, and also frame their pet topics as crisis solutions.

But there is an underlying problem here. Most such academic papers and guru reports cite the same source for their crisis concern—a study published by the Standish Group more than a decade ago, a study that reported huge failure rates, 70% or more, and minuscule success rates, a study that condemned software practice by the title they employed for the published version of their study, *The Chaos Report* [4].

So the Standish *Chaos Report* could be considered fundamental to most claims of crisis. What do we really know about that study?