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CSD-380 - Assignment 8.2

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Change Approval Dangers

Change Management Processes were designed primarily as a way to manage risk and to keep track of modifications to their systems. The idea is that anytime there is expected to be a change to a system the developer would create a change request. They would often then have their change go before a board of people that discuss and approve or deny the change. By placing the request in front of a group of people who are aware of what is happening in an enterprise the idea is that they could coordinate changes and manage risk by making sure that there are not too many changes in a given window and to ensure that the team put in the effort to adequately describe the risks associated with their change and detail what they have in mind to mitigate those risks. These standards were built in a world where deployments were often scheduled weeks out and there was plenty of time for scheduled changes and review boards but as companies shift to a DevOps model with a more continuous deployment model it is important to consider the dangers inherent to a change approval process.

DevOps focuses on removing bottlenecks to be more agile in your development practices. Efficiency is a key concept and things that prevent quick deployments can really delay the work a DevOps team is trying to accomplish. In a poorly implemented change approval process these bottlenecks can be detrimental to the goals of a DevOps team. Joanne Molesky of Axelos sums up the primary issue with Change Approval processes succinctly when she writes “The central problem is that approvals and segregation of duties tend to be bottlenecks that focus on ticking boxes for compliance rather than meeting the business need for fast frequent change to systems – as in hourly or daily, versus weekly or monthly.” She goes on to say that this is often a problem because the people who manage the Change Approval process often have different goals than a team trying to push changes to systems.

Another major issue is that Change Approval processes are often perceived as an additional piece of work with little to no benefit. Instead, it can feel like the team is performing labor for no real reason and going through sometimes brutal approval processes with discussions that can feel more like navigating a field of political landmines than working to provide actual benefit to the company. This can lead to teams finding methods of performing the work without following the prescribed change processes. By circumventing change processes businesses can lose critical information about the work that is being done and resolving issues can become that much more difficult.

The goals of a change approval process are often built around managing Governance guidelines, managing risk, and meeting compliance. While these are all important issues if these processes are not streamlined to accommodate quick development cycles these can produce giant bottlenecks on deployments. Additionally, approvers are often from teams with little knowledge of the work being performed or expertise in the areas of which they are approving granting the perception of providing little actual benefit for the team doing the work.

In spite of all of this a change approval process remains critical and there are steps an organization can take to help make sure their processes remain relevant. Building trust and communication between teams can go a long way to improving change control. It is also extremely helpful to move the approval processes for the vast majority of changes closer to the teams that are performing the work. This places more expertise over the changes made and allows someone who understands the work being done the ability to escalate especially risky changes up the ladder when it is important to do so. I love the following quote from Atlassian “So, how can we overcome these challenges? Well, it begins with dispelling the myth that heavy process reduces risks. Then embracing a culture, corresponding practices, and tools that help teams collaborate and ship. And finally, continuously incorporating information to demonstrate the value of the previous steps and continue striving for improvement.” The first idea of fighting the perception that integrating large amounts of outside processes reduce risk is just a tremendous insight as in my experience adding too many unnecessary processes just forces people to work outside of the prescribed guidelines which is almost worse than having no process at all. Furthermore, a process of incorporation the learnings over time to improve workflows is a central tenant of DevOps and rebuilding your change approval processes from this mindset makes a tremendous amount of sense when applying this to a DevOps culture.

Change Approval processes have been a central tenant of Information Technology departments for a very long time. Much like every other aspect of IT, if these processes do not adapt to modern work paradigms, they risk becoming detrimental to the goals of an IT staff. The Challenges of making sure that Change Approval processes provide value to the business and to the people doing the work, without feeling like an enormous burden or bottleneck can only be overcome by applying the same DevOps principles to the change approval processes that a DevOps team applies to the rest of the work that they do.

**References**

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