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Judge Projects by Their Covers

By: Ken Hanley (13 Dec 2002)

IS Guerrilla

Lots of things have stupid names. Spinach. Ostriches. The offspring of rock musicians who've ingested too many hallucinogenic drugs. Elderly great-aunts - I'd better leave that one alone....

Stupid names for all these things, and quite possibly, really stupid names for the projects you're working on right now.

On a charitable day, I'd say that the way we name IT projects isn't ignorant, merely misguided.

This is not a charitable day.

It seems to me that most of the names that get attached to the projects we work on are made up of irrelevant references to the technology we're doing them with, they're overloaded with version numbers and goofy acronyms, and they have little if anything to do with the actual reason these projects are being undertaken in the first place.

You think I exaggerate? Take this simple test: Put the complete list of your organization's IT project names in front of your CEO, and ask him or her how many of them they recognize. I'll bet \$50 that he/she won't recognize more than a quarter of your projects based on their title.

I remember a heated discussion I had with one of my client CEOs a couple of years back - when Walter and I sat down to discuss his way-off-the-rails project, the first thing I asked him was the name of the project (I already knew it, in fact, but I wanted to make a point).

"It's the J.D. Edwards project," Walter said.

"No it isn't" said I.

Walter looked at me as if I wasn't very bright.

"Yes it is," he said.

"No it isn't," I said again.

I was clearly making Walter angry - time to make my point.

"Look, J.D. Edwards is just the name of the software you're using - that name doesn't tell me a thing about the business problem you're trying to solve. So what is the business problem you're trying to solve here?"

Walter paused for a minute, and then told me that his real problem had to do with combining inventory from across his various divisions into a single product, and his organization's

inability to compute an accurate cost for the result by combining all the input costs:
"Essentially, we've got a big problem with inventory transparency - it's just about impossible for us to see accurate input costs across divisions as we bring the pieces together."

The things I say sometimes: "So why not just call the thing the Inventory Pricing Transparency Project?"

And so it was. And at the next steering committee meeting, Walter announced the new name of the project, and you could almost see the lights go on in the eyes of the executives around the room: "So that's what we've been up to for the last six months/\$3 million," they seemed to say.

Folks, projects are all about business results. Technology and process matter to us, but they don't matter a bit to the people we're doing the projects for.

Calling a project "J.D. Edwards" is like calling a family reunion "Air Canada" i.e. it focuses on the tool or process we're using to get there, but not the result we're after. And if we haven't got the desired result nailed down in the project title, we've got the start of a big problem.

The fact that our clients (clients, not users dammit!) don't know what IT projects are all about based on how they're named it isn't their fault - it's not because they're ignorant 'users', it's because, in our technical nirvana, we often forget why we're doing the projects in the first place.

So we end up with stupid names like the "TKS Version 3 upgrade project" or the "SAM 3 project." The only thing worse than stupid, irrelevant project names are stupid, irrelevant project names with cute acronyms...there's a special place in hell for people who spend their time dreaming up cute acronyms for IT projects.

And a dumb IT project name ends up standing out like a beacon that says: "Here work the techno-weenies who forget what business they're really in." We might as slap on the propeller beanies and pocket protectors, and plaster our offices with Star Trek posters right now.

The rule is simple - every single one of the projects on your books should have a long, awkward, results-describing, non-technical, non-version numbered, non-acronymable (there - I made up a word) name.

If you give your project a geeky technical name, may you find a lump of coal in your stocking this year. Remember, people change their names all the time. So this one should be a snap.

Hanley is an IS professional in Calgary. He can be reached at isguerrilla@hotmail.com