



EVERYONE HAS PRESCRIPTIVE SOLUTIONS

by Jerry E. Durant, Managing Director

As the acclaimed poet Robert Frost framed “The Road Not Taken” (era 1915) it provided me with pause to understand why I am compelled to freely share advise. Is it because I have a well hidden gem of advise or is it simply a compulsion to walk in the footsteps of others before me? This is not something that I have stumbled upon casually, rather it’s been a constant state of reflection that has consumed me since early childhood. While others would blissfully overlook the need, or maybe aren’t even aware of the inane obligation, I have constantly sought opportunities to share. Some have sat patiently listening to each and every word, others have lasted all of a couple of minutes only to let the remainder of the dialog fall into the abyss of inattention. Years have taught me brevity, and to hold tight to the compulsion to give all of the knowledge in on large dosage.

Although software engineering, in it’s entirety, has been my passion, there are segments that are first loves. Be it software testing, or security penetration, my most recent compulsion that captivated me over fifteen (15) years ago is the discipline of outsourcing/off-shoring. In certain circles these terms are held with contempt and distain. The loss of security, in job and in being, and a malaised confidence in companies create real and lasting threats to employees. There are however bitter sweet outcomes that occur from time-to-time in the form of employment reengagement. Lasting comfort should not be taken from this. Should outsourcing/off-shoring occur correctly then unemployment without reengagement will ensue.

There is more than enough failure history to report in the area of outsourcing/off-shoring endeavors. The reasons and rationale have run the gambit from poor performing and inadequately prepared servicers to the lack of client side participation. The use of outsourcing/off-shoring was first engaged to meet bandwidth deficiencies. It just so happened that a bi-product was lower cost. What became secondary suddenly pushed into the forefront. With growing pressures being placed on CIOs to cut costs, and deliver service, the outsource/off-shore solutions looked like a wonderful answer. It might even present a convenient opportunity to reduce workforce. Going headlong into a solution, lacking experience, informed-real knowledge and cultural understanding was bad enough. We then added to this mixture inadequate commitment of internal resources, and sometimes even the wrong resources being contributed. The result, as you might expect, was lowered, poor results often with resource consumptions greater than had the project been done internally. The fallout is shown in the lack of remaining CIOs (and project participants) that can share the full extent of the pain endured. If fortunate enough to gather things up and get another job, the rule for them became NO Outsourcing/Off-Shoring. The shift from one extreme to the other took place, and the word was quickly spread to others that would listen.

From these failures there are many insightful lessons that are gained. Many are held as closely guarded, embarrassing secrets. How could the best-of-the-best fail? Little is attributable to the person but rather the introducing a new global operating paradigm. A few of the lessons that have been shared include the need for committed involvement, this is an absolute necessity. In cases where internal resources are not available, often the result of inadequate bandwidth, client company can engage a surrogate (but experienced) facilitator. Insist on experienced and connection in both the

outsourcing/offshoring enterprise but also a knowledge of the service culture that is being utilized. The facilitator acts as the eyes-ears-mind and driving force behind the project, on behalf of the client. It is also expected that the facilitator will encourage decision making and communications with the client. Since an enormous amount of trust is required, the size of the consultancy play a large role. The use of a facilitator/surrogate allows the client to concentrate on other matters and is engaged only when absolutely necessary. In short, the client is left to make use of intellectual contribution and not engaged in heavy lifting project duties. It is appropriate to note that this shift of roles will reduce employment fearfulness. The paradigm takes on the role as providers from the former role as doers. Those early attempts failed in this regard, it was all or nothing. The work was expected to be done completely by the servicer and the client expected to be disengaged from the project. Yet it was expected that intellectual value be embodied in intellectual results without sufficient project engagement.

In the last four to five years I have seen a vast improvement in seeking out and securing core requisite service company background data. This has involved financial stability, leadership profiles, process frameworks, and historical delivery recommendations. But with every silver-lined cloud there is still the cloud. We also know that just having these core attributes does not insure operational perfection. Rather, it a foundation measure. In our own organizations, we have had processes, oversight and policy direction. The results have not always been great but the mechanisms are there as a base starting point. I have seen on both the domestic and off-shore fronts high CMMi scores that bear little value when compared to the work outcomes. Quite simply it's the state of being vs. the process emersion cultural, the form has not become practice. A lingering question that has not been asked, little published researched, but is worth thinking about is whether the outsourced/off-shoring produced results are worse than what we might delivered domestically? A possible reason for not asking is that it's far to easy to cast dispersions upon "in the spotlight" projects (some with wishful desires for success, while many others prayed for failure). Casual unscientific observation indicates that except in those cases of cataclysmic failure the problems (and error densities) are on par with in-house delivered solutions.

No discussion would be complete without mentioning the trend of setting up a company owned enterprise offshore. Aside from the steps needed to implement an offshore business, there is little evidence that these are any more successful than independent service providers. Unless the company positions staff offshore, you are still dealing with a culturally diverse offshore enterprise. The difference is that you now own the full operations. Recourse measures are limited, and maintaining capacity consumption remains a priority (even with lower costs). Additionally, placement in outsource regions can provide additional challenges in staff recruitment and retainage. Again, committed involvement is key to success, whether through engaged services or through self-directed enterprises.

Short of a exhaustive list of do's and don'ts there is one final piece of advise. Be selective as to what project to use outsourced/off-shoring services for. The preferred is to use a 'test project' of low risk to develop experience, rather than to dive into the deep end of the pool. Often we aren't given the opportunity to be selective. Immediate urgency and cost reduction/benefit needs force the decision of outsourcing/off-shoring to take place. The versatility of the organization and the leadership of the CTO will influence the outcome. I remember a meeting two years ago where I was asked what versatility and leadership measures could be taken to positively effect the outcome. After contemplation and analysis I determined that using an unbiased party was in order. The impartial component provided objectivity, free of company/project biases, and allowed for a 'thinking outside the box' atmosphere to be fostered. It would not be

totally accurate to say that everything went off without a hitch. There were pungents, and external business distractions that made every attempt to sway the project. Some were willful, but most were naive and had objectivity not come into play, but the failure potential was there.

In conclusion, goal accomplishment involves focus, commitment and experience. Even when goals are unrealistic, these three requisites will have a strong influence on success.

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