Productivity and finding the right balance
of acceptable risk

iBase Professional Digital Asset Management

1 Introduction

This article is an extract from "Productivity - Doing it right, a handbook for business and organisation", and illustrates the need for digital asset management in the context of risk, productivity and hence the cases to be made for ROI (Return on Investment) for such a system.

2 Assessing the risk

There are often many ways of achieving an objective or carrying out a task, including routes which ignore steps which are known to be there for very good reasons but which because of shortage of time, laziness, pressure from others and so on, are deliberately avoided or worked around.

There's a very good, if somewhat extreme analogy which involves risking life.

> *As any pilot knows better than me, before taking off in even a light aircraft there's a long list of checks to be made to ensure that the machine is airworthy – the control surfaces all work as they should, there's sufficient fuel for the flight, each of the instruments is working properly, the engine indicators all show the correct reading – and so on… Of course, nine times out ten (or nine hundred and ninety-nine times out of a thousand for all I know), if the checks aren't made there will nevertheless be a safe and uneventful flight. But – there is a real and finite risk that the flight could end in disaster due to a failure in something that would otherwise have been checked, and with such high stakes there is clearly a good deal of incentive for carrying them out.*

O.K. – such high stakes are not the norm for most of us and I'm certainly not advocating that each and every action taken at work should be preceded by something akin to a pilot's pre-flight check. However, I do suggest that for every action there is associated with it some level of risk which is increased or reduced according to the route taken. It's a matter of finding the right balance of acceptable risk and productivity.

The analogy with pre-flight checks is useful because it does remind us that we are in fact comparing the relative risks of one course of action to another.

3 A short-term view

This is a variation on the previous point, where expediency doesn't involve any obvious risk in the short term. The job is done quickly and easily and the immediate objectives are met - but it will create problems and increased costs in the longer term.

In their everyday work many organisations and departments will create what are broadly termed 'digital assets', such as for example text documents, PowerPoint presentations, spread-sheets, images, PDFs, video and audio files, drawings and so on.

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It's the easiest thing in the world to save these digital assets in a folder, either on your own machine or perhaps in a networked or cloud location. You can very simply create your own folder and put all of your own files there, thinking that you know exactly what you've done and will be able to easily find and retrieve them at any time in the future.

But – when you've got hundreds or thousands of digital assets in your folder, how quick and easy will it be to find the one you want six months or two years later? Indeed, will you even remember what's there?

And how about others, your colleagues? They might not have access to your folder, and even if they have, how can they know what's in it?

4   Better solutions

A better solution is to have a communal folder structure where everyone puts their files, at least then everyone can get to them. But how should the folder structure be organised - by file type, or by department, or by prime use, or by author, or etc…? None of these on their own will make it easy for someone to find out what's available for what they have in mind.

The best solution is to use a Digital Asset Management system, which enables files of any type to be stored, found and retrieved. A good digital asset management system will provide browser based access so that no software needs to be installed on users' computers; it will have a comprehensive security model to ensure that items can only be found and retrieved by those who have the appropriate permissions; means of searching for what is wanted will include facilities to create a structured folder hierarchy, enter metadata as tags and keywords, and provide for the creation of collections, sets etc… in any way that is most useful.

With a digital asset management system there will never be any need to waste time searching for what is wanted, or even re-creating something because the original cannot be found.

This is just one example – although a surprisingly common one – which nevertheless serves well as an illustration of the long-term impacts of using short-term expediency.

5   A short-term approach can cost more in the end

Using a short-term approach might take less time initially than one that has an eye to longer-term consequences, but then again it might not. It can often be the case that doing something properly in the first instance will take no more, and sometimes less time than not doing it properly.

If a culture of quick fixes and short cuts has been allowed to develop, the option and cost of doing the job properly won't even be considered. It's crucial to avoid this trap. If short term approaches become the norm there will be an ever-tightening spiral of increasing costs and poorer products and services, and the spiral will cost more and more to get out of as time goes by.

The simple and straightforward fact is that any additional effort required to do the job properly will be saved many times over when compared to what happens if it isn't done properly.

In every organisation there will be many job specific opportunities for time to be wasted in the long term through not doing the job properly, the commenting of software code above is just one that's particular to software development. But I can give a couple of simple generic examples which at first glance might seem insignificant or even pedantic, but which when considered across an organisation can add up to a significant amount of wasted time and money.

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1. If care isn't taken to ensure that a document is filed in a place that, at a later date, other people, or even the person doing the filing, can find easily, time will be wasted searching for it or even re-creating it. It might have only taken 30 seconds longer to file the document properly, in the first place, where it could be found easily later on, but it could take many minutes or several hours to find it, and even longer perhaps to recreate it if it can't be found at all.

2. Similarly, if when someone is asked to carry out a task they are not provided with all of the information they need to be able to complete it, they might either spend time looking for the missing information, or not realise that they are missing it and try to do the job – unsuccessfully – without it. In any event either time will be wasted, or the job won't be done properly. Again; a little thought and attention to detail to ensure that clear and sufficient instructions were given might only have taken a couple of extra minutes, and would have saved a good deal more than that in the execution of the task.

These sorts of things, or something very much like them, are probably happening every day, in just about every organisation. If an organisation employs 100 people, and half of them waste or cause to be wasted by someone else say 30 minutes each day, that's 50 hours - more than a man-week - wasted every day.

The examples are simple and common to any role, but just about every point made throughout this book can also have a bearing on costs, which will be reduced or controlled by doing the job properly in the first place.

6   Finding a balance

The aims is to find more productive - quicker and more effective - ways of doing things which don't cost more in the long term and which don't compromise the quality of outcome, products or services.

Whether a quicker or different approach will be more cost effective in the end isn't always obvious, and certainly gut feeling, although a valuable asset for anyone, can be notoriously inaccurate in such matters. The consequences of using alternative approaches need to be carefully and rationally considered, and expectations of short-term gains measured against longer-term affects.

In short, assess the risks and choose the route that provides the most cost-effective outcome.

7   Summary

- Find the right balance of acceptable risk and productivity.
- Short term expediency can be high risk.
- Quicker isn't necessarily cheaper.

Contact us by email or phone for more information or to request a free system.

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