

Keeping Your Projects on Track

Ensuring Excellence in NPD

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Success in New Product Development (NPD) depends on how well you integrate the process phases. A chain is nothing without the links. Consider Figure 1, which depicts a typical NPD process as a chain of events in a life of a product. We call it the "ROYGBIV of NPD," as the rainbow implies a continuous process from A to Z. Japanese companies attuned to the rich tradition of poetic metaphor refer to this continuum as "Sunrise to Sunset," but the meaning remains basically the same.



Figure 1. The ROYGBIV of NPD

The ROYGBIV of NPD identifies six distinct areas of expertise, from Innovation and Opportunity Analysis, through Development and Production, to Lifecycle Maintenance. Each area is unique, and requires a completely different skill set. Typically, people skilled at innovation or marketing differ from those who design or build the actual product. Very few demonstrate versatility throughout the process – most have only one or two areas of expertise.

This creates a serious challenge. Specialists with dissimilar skill sets often speak different languages, even though their native tongues may be the same. Naturally, this creates a breeding ground for communication breakdowns, which *always* results in lost time and wasted resources. In fact, the problem is so universal, we can say "always" without fear of exaggeration.

In the early 90s we used the term "Over-the-Wall Engineering" to describe each department "throwing" the design "over the wall" to the next department upon the completion of its task. Surprisingly, many companies continue to lead their NPD activities this way today. The communication gaps between each of the stages are staggering, resulting in problems that grow exponentially by the end of the process.

To address the problem of lost time and wasted resources, the industry introduced the Project Management discipline. Project Managers have to be generalists. Their job is adhering to project schedules and budgets by encouraging the team to higher levels of performance. Additionally, they resolve conflict and provide the "glue" between the individual stages. This approach succeeds in allowing specialists to focus on their areas of expertise, but it does have a limitation. The approach breaks down when the specialists need to communicate with each other.

While the typical Project Manager can keep the project's **timeline** on track, they often can't manage the flow of project **data**. By this we don't mean ensuring the safe storage of project

files on the central file server. Rather, we refer to the art of **translation** – in this case, translating from English to English.

Data is the essence of all communication and the meaning has to be transferred without alteration. Professional translators know that the art of translation is in the ability to convey the overall meaning – or sometimes feeling – of the original message, not necessarily precise words. Translation seeks to establish understanding. People who speak a foreign language will recognize this metaphor.

Similarly, the ability to speak multiple “languages” helps ensure that the message from Marketing doesn’t confuse the engineers, and that the data from Engineering meshes with the expectations of Manufacturing. In the ideal world, data flows so well that the mounting holes in the chassis always match the mounting holes in the PC boards on the very first try. Unfortunately, as some readers would agree, we don’t live in the ideal world just yet.

The situation unfortunately becomes more difficult as more and more companies outsource their production, and increasingly, design and development, to offshore ODMs. All of a sudden, the translation metaphor becomes even more urgent -- we don’t just have to translate from English to English anymore, but also need to translate from English to English and *then* to the language of the target country. And then we have to translate all the way back. It is not surprising that most outsourcing efforts leave a bad taste in the mouth after the first couple of tries. It’s all about communication. Without experience, it’s very difficult to get it right.

Effective communication is the “glue” that keeps the project on track by always meeting the specialists’ need for data. Managers often underestimate the amount of effort needed to keep the data flowing smoothly, especially when NPD chains span across continents, as is often the case today. To succeed in New Product Development, managers need to recognize and encourage the extra effort of translation, which should be based on deep cultural understanding of both the sender and the recipient of the message. Someone has to perform this role, either inside or outside the company, or the project is headed for unwanted delays.

When selecting outsourcing partners in today’s global environment, companies should look beyond service providers with a particular skill. The service provider must speak your language, your customer’s language and the multiple languages of your suppliers. Only then they can successfully integrate into the NPD chain and become a crucial, reliable partner to whom you could entrust your most valuable assets – the trust of your customers and the value of your brand.

Don’t fall into the trap of providers who claim excellence in a particular subject matter. More often than not, this will lead down the road to frustration caused by inadequate communication. Partner with those who will:

1. Communicate with you proactively and effectively, on any level
2. Understand the art of translation and appreciate your entire NPD chain
3. Are approachable enough to make your employees comfortable communicating

This will ensure that the data flow will be uninterrupted and that your project will stay on track, despite the distance and the language barrier. And that’s Excellence in NPD.

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