How Gen-Y can impact our delivery and value creation

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Come Saturday, Vikas Sharma will be traveling to New Jersey to start on his next assignment. Vikas will be starting in his role as a technical lead for the exposure management system that Mindtree is building for a large financial services corporation.

We told Vikas about his new assignment a week back, and neither Vikas nor his project manager has any doubts that he will do a good job. Every week, we have projects starting in Mindtree, and like Vikas, every week, dozens of Mindtree minds start off on a new assignment.

Some of them could be joining a completely new project, where most of the team comes together in a matter of weeks. Everybody is new, but they need to rapidly get down to working together and developing the software. Others could be joining a long running project, where most of the team is in place and has been together for months. Here, it is the newcomer who needs to come upto speed with the more established team.

How is it that so many people manage to successfully integrate themselves into a new team? How is it that project teams repeatedly induct new team members without missing a beat?

There are two major reasons. One, project teams have established methods to inducting a new member, and Two , more importantly, most Mindtree minds have been through this before and know how to go about integrating themselves into a team. And, whether you are joining the first or the second type of project, the knowledge and skills you need to become a productive member of the project, remain the same.

At Mindtree, we categorize this knowledge into three areas **Domain**, **Technology** and **Operational Procedures**. And it is the attempt of every project and the responsibility of every team member to ensure that gaps in each of these areas is bridged.

Domain is simply an understanding of how the software is used in real life, an understanding of the real purpose of the software.
A few years back we had built an application for risk management for an insurance company. The team were accomplished java programmers but had little interest in understanding how the insurance underwriters would use the software they were building. The team simply built the software as per the specification given to them. The user acceptance phase on this project was one of the longest we have had, as users kept pointing out mismatches between the computations that the application produced versus how they did it in real life, manually – but correctly, in their excel sheets. Technically our team couldn't be faulted, the software was as per specification, but what they had created was of little use.

One of the first things Vikas will do in his new assignment is to read all the material he can get his hands on, meet the users and business analysts, and ask questions – lots and lots of them.

This is a quality that all project teams want their team members to have – an interest in the business purpose of the software, and the courage to ask questions.

Technology is about understanding the architecture and technical design of the system. Technical team members focus on this aspect of the project first. Differences between individuals lie in the degree of breadth and depth that each person goes to.

One of the customers we worked with insisted that before we start taking over their application maintenance portfolio, we develop an understanding of the frameworks they had built. They insisted that our technical leads spend time with their architects to understand the principles and purpose of the framework, their intent in designing it the way they had.

What we realized, a little later, was that they wanted our leads to imbibe this understanding and pass it on to the engineers. So that whenever the engineering teams patched, added to, and tweaked the application, they would do so without violating the integrity of the original design. I doubt if without the customers prodding we would have spent the time we did in understanding and appreciating the design. That it helped in the long run, I have no doubt about.

What then, is the quality we expect from projects team on this front? We look for curiosity. An interest in uncovering, in digging deeper, in seeking wider. A keenness to understand how things work.

Operational Procedures is the least respected area by new entrants to a team, and fanatically followed by the long timers. These are the procedures that the team follows – for development, for build and deployment, for configuration management. They are the traffic rules, that when followed, make moving forward smoother.

Like the traffic rules – and metro city dwellers will relate to this – every once in a while, an individual violates these rules for a trivial gain and in turn cause delay and pain for a larger group. I still remember an incident where one of our star programmers got hell from both the testing team and our maintenance team. Both teams were up in arms because one of the applications had stopped working. The testing team couldn't proceed with their work and blamed the team maintaining the application, who in turn were certain that they had no hand in the failure.

An outperformer from his campus batch, the star has been personally picked by our technical lead to be a member of a critical services module. What the star did not fully understand till that point, was that any change he did, needed to be approved by all consumers of the services, and then tested extensively before any move to the system test environments. His well-intentioned tweak had caused a dependent application to fail, a loss of almost half a day for the testing team and also sent the maintenance team on a wild goose chase.

The operational procedure on a project is about responsibility. They are as much about each individual responsibility as they are about the individual's responsibility to the team.

All projects have their own version of addressing the three knowledge areas. Some take to extensive documentation, some rely on highly structured programs, some bring creative elements like videos and quizzes. The effectiveness of these methods is multiplied when an individual is prepared. The individual who joins a team - intent on understanding the domain, curious about the technology and aware of his responsibilities to the team - is guaranteed to become a valuable member of the team.

Welcome to possible