

PM WORLD TODAY – VIEWPOINT – SEPTEMBER 2009

Functionality First

By Dr. James Brown

I was returning from a business trip in Germany last year and had a very early taxi to drive me to the airport. It was so early that when I climbed in the front seat of the taxi it was still dark and I wasn't exactly coherent. As we sped along the autobahn I noticed the car had a hood ornament I had never seen before. I had a hard time identifying the ornament in the darkness. I suddenly couldn't grasp what kind of car I was riding in. I asked the taxi driver "what kind of car is this?" and he said it was a Mercedes (the typical German taxi).

I pointed at the hood ornament and he laughed and said it was a tablespoon! Obviously there was a story behind a Mercedes with a spoon as a hood ornament. He told me his Mercedes hood ornament had been stolen and replaced three times and so the last time he went into his garage and trimmed the handle off a spoon and attached it. He smiled and said "no one has stolen the spoon." He said as a taxi driver he needed a hood ornament for reference since he was constantly pulling up very close behind other taxis in lines waiting on customers and the spoon worked just fine for judging distance.

Professional Appearance Does Not Guarantee Professional Content

The taxi driver's tablespoon meets his functional purpose for a hood ornament regardless of how unique or unsightly it may appear to others. There is a lesson for project managers here. Often in a project a lot of time can be spent developing fancy presentations or reports or unnecessarily embellishing deliverables. Sometimes organizations have groups or consultants whose sole role is to beautify. There is nothing inherently wrong with this but I can guarantee thousands and thousands of hours are spent doing this beyond what is necessary. You would be rich beyond words if you had a single dollar for every fancy report delivered by a consultant that gathers dust while it creates no action on the part of the recipient organization.

It's not just presentations and reports...tools can go overboard too.

I was told by one of the top project management scheduling tool providers that "project managers don't care about how good their product actually produces project schedules...their opinion is that a project manager's primary concern is the tool presents pretty Gantt charts." I wish I was kidding! Next time a company is demonstrating their tool pay attention to what they emphasize. Boil it down to functionality.

Err on the side of Simplicity

For presentations, reports and tools all you need is enough information presented in a structured way that provides the basis for making a good decision. With all the capability and choices products have today the real challenge can be keeping it simple. We just celebrated the 40th Anniversary of the Apollo Moon landing. If we were gathering the requirements to do that today we would say it is impossible to accomplish it with the computing power/capability they used. Because we have so much computing capability at our disposal we would find it next to impossible to trim it down to what they so successfully used in the Apollo program.

Just because the capability exists doesn't mean we need to use it.

Take great care to understand that the bare minimum functionality of what is required for success. There is nothing wrong with more capability but you should always understand what the bare minimum capability is to achieve functionality.

About the Author:



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Dr. James T. Brown, president of SEBA[®] Solutions Inc., a Registered Education Provider for the Project Management Institute, has provided training and consulting services for dozens of companies nationally and internationally. SEBA[®] Solutions also provides OnePdu.com <http://OnePdu.com> for online project management training. A recognized authority in project management, Dr. Brown is a frequently invited speaker on project management areas of interest. He is the author of *The Handbook of Program Management* published by McGraw Hill and is a member of the Project Management Institute, the National Speakers Association and the National Association of Corporate Directors. Dr. Brown has a patent for a project scheduling methodology, and has received numerous awards including "Engineer of the Year" from the Cape Canaveral Technical Societies and is a recipient of the "NASA Public Service Medal" for exceptional contributions to NASA's mission. He has a Ph.D. in Industrial Engineering from the University of Central Florida, a MS in Engineering Management from Florida Institute of Technology and a BS in Electrical Engineering from Tennessee State University. He is a licensed Professional Engineer (PE), a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) and a certified speaking professional (CSP). To learn more about SEBA[®] visit www.SebaSolutions.com. You can contact James directly at jtbrown@sebasolutions.com.