Standards Case Study: The almost impossible-to-support database

A case where the IT Production Architecture team with clear Standards was able to guide the selection of a business software package, to ensure that the final selection was Supportable in Production.

The Challenge

An international company was in the process of searching for a new software product to address key business needs. They interviewed a number of software houses, looking for an off-the-shelf package.

The ideal product would be deployed in multiple business locations across Europe and possibly in the US and Far East. It would be responsible for the management of tens of thousands of complex business transactions. In turn, this would enable the client to obtain significant competitive advantage in their market.

The project team responsible for the worldwide search had the task of short-listing candidate companies and conducting initial interviews to compare the product offerings against the request for information (RFI) questionnaire.

The creation of the RFI document itself was a major project management exercise, which was primarily driven by the software development team, who were organisationally aligned with the business sector.

Following the creation of the initial drafts of the RFI document, it was noted that the IT Production team had not been directly involved with this specification exercise, and their input should also be sought. This was particularly relevant because IT Production were, at the time, responsible for supporting the current "in-house" predecessor application, which had a history of production issues and perceived reliability problems.

Our Involvement

Dennis Adams had been responsible for the creation, and ongoing management, of the IT Production Technical Strategy and Architecture team, which had obtained the specific remit to provide a "Production" perspective on architectural choices across the organisation.

The team comprised a number of highly experienced and skilled IT Production technical engineers, who were chosen not only for their technical expertise, but also for their "soft skills", specifically the ability to bridge the cultural divide between production and development and to engage with development teams on a peer basis.

Upon hearing of this project, Dennis immediately allocated one of the most experienced IT Production Architects to join the RFI assessment team.

In practice, the RFI assessment exercise took many months, and became virtually a full-time exercise for the architect who was engaged.

This exercise reinforced the strong cultural differences that can arise between the development and production teams. This is understandable, since development teams are typically aligned directly to business units, and are concerned to deliver the functionality that is needed to bring competitive advantage to the business. For many development teams, a project is complete once it has been functionally delivered.

On the other hand, the production team is typically interested in the "non-functional" requirements which dictate the ability of the application to continue to deliver business the business benefit during the "post-go-live" phase of it's life-cycle.

Approach

Key to any assessment of a potential software or hardware project was to define the "production-worthiness" criteria or non-functional requirements against which the proposed solution would be judged. Among other things, the following criteria were identified:

- Scalability
- Reliability and Stability
- Resilience
- Backup and Recovery
- Security
- Monitoring and Management
- Supportability

Once these terms had been described, understood and agreed with all stakeholders, it was possible to score any application proposal against these criteria.

In the course of the RFI process, the team interviewed a number of software houses, looking for an off-the-shelf package. One of these packages was clearly an impressive functional development to address the functional requirements. It was also extremely configurable from a business perspective and very soon became a favourite with the RFI team.

However, when the IT production architecture team representative looked at this package, he was able to demonstrate that it would have been unsupportable in production. For example, the package lacked any ability to take a point-in-time backup – essential if the system needed to be restored in the case of a hardware failure or a major disaster.

Benefits

The critical importance of looking at production-worthiness criteria was underlined by this particular case.

The involvement of the Production Architecture team meant that a product was assessed not just on it's functional capability, but on it's ability to actually deliver the benefits long-term.

In this case, the definition of production ready criteria saved the organisation hundreds of thousands of euros that may have been spent on the wrong product, even notwithstanding the potential risk to its business and reputation.

Further Information

Dennis Adams Associates does not disclose any client names, details, or any commercially sensitive data with third parties.

For further enquiries, please contact us via our web site at **http://www.dennisadams.co.uk** or email to **info@dennisadams.co.uk**.