



Technology on Target Series

Part 1

The Prototype: Cornerstone of Project Management

Ever heard of an application development project being over budget? Late? Not what was expected? *Or all three?*

Prototyping is the answer.

A primary concern when considering a custom application is uncertainty of outcome.

Prototypes provide certainty. Cost certainty and schedule certainty are assured by a design that allows a software developer to commit to a fixed cost and delivery schedule.

An ambiguous software specification may result in miscommunication and unmet expectations. Last minute changes to a nearly completed solution can result in schedule changes and budget overruns. Failure to add the required functionality could result in unsatisfied users, poor user adoption and could dilute the benefits of the new system. Prototypes play an essential role in the ultimate success of application development projects by virtually eliminating uncertainty.

If you are not familiar with software prototypes, you may be asking:

- *"How will I know what I'm getting before it is too late to change?"*
- *"How can a prototype prevent budget overruns and unmet schedules?"*
- *"How can a prototype save me money?"*
- *"What if my preferred vendor does not advocate prototypes?"*
- *"Why do some software developers not mention prototypes?"*

Let's take a closer look ►►

“How will I know what I’m getting before it is too late to change?”

A prototype includes a layout or representation of each data form and report. These layouts can be created with a prototyping tool or a word processor. Each layout has a plain English description of the form’s logic and business rules, including data validation logic and transaction criteria. For web applications, the prototype can be created as static web pages, allowing the user can click through the application and gain a better sense of working with the new solution.

Prototype provides the test

When your software solution is delivered, you can compare the software to the prototype to ensure that all the correct features were delivered. In this way, the prototype acts as the measuring stick for acceptance testing.

“How can a prototype prevent budget overruns and unmet schedules?”

Once a prototype has been completed, your software vendor will have enough information to offer you a fixed cost and delivery date.

The Guarantee

A qualified vendor who fully understands the software performance you expect will guarantee the cost and schedule. A 10% penalty for late delivery is reasonable. These commitments help create a level playing field for both client and vendor.

“How can a prototype save me money?”

Competitive bidding!

When a client pays a consultant to create a solution prototype, there should be enough information contained in the prototype for *other* vendors to quote a fixed price and a delivery schedule. By collecting competitive bids -- and letting the vendors know you are doing so -- you stand a better chance of getting each vendors ‘best effort’ to meet your needs at a fair price. *Make sure there is no language in your prototyping contract that precludes using the prototype to collect competitive bids.* Keep your options open.

“What if my preferred vendor does not advocate prototypes?”

Find another vendor or consultant to do the prototype.

...but don't burn any bridges!

If vendor A will not agree to your prototype phase, allow vendor B to create the prototype. Later, if you still have a positive working relationship with vendor A, you can consider their bid based on the prototype. Better still, you can ask a third vendor to submit a competing bid.

“Why do some software developers not to mention prototypes?”

The bright light of Accountability!

The goal of a prototype is to be specific, remove the gray area, and promote a culture of accountability. Only another vendor can explain their own policies, and the rationale behind them. Ask about prototypes, and fixed prices, and maybe you'll learn quite a bit about how a vendor does business.

The Bottom Line.

In the end you'll find the prototype to be an essential project management tool. Users will better understand how the system will work. Management will have a firm grip on the system's capabilities and your vendor will have the clearest understanding of your expectations. There is no better way to achieve cost and schedule certainty. And that's the bottom line.

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