

Prototypes vs. Pilots

by Hal Williams

RESULTS



In a nutshell, prototyping means building something promptly to see what works.

Pilots (and demonstration projects) are first uses of a completed product. Pilots are done after the planning is complete. Prototypes happen during a design process to test critical assumptions, especially about how customers use a service or other product...and what they will pay for it.

Pilots presume a planning process. Let's get it just right before we try it. Ready.....aim...aim some more....fire. Prototypes combine thinking and doing. Here are four advantages over conventional planning:

1. *Designers and planners become clear on their customers and their requirements.* It is extremely difficult for users or their helpers to know in advance just what they will find of greatest value. Henry Ford once said that if asked his first customers what they most needed, they would have replied, “a faster horse.”

Needs statements are said to handle the matter of defining but they fall very short. First, they blur what people need with what they want. Second, they speak to categories not the richness of individuals. And third they are hypothetical. What people think and say they will do if something was available is surprisingly disconnected with what they actually do when the “if” becomes reality.

2. *The process encourages collaboration.* It is far more interactive to try something and build on what works than to develop a document—where interaction is often limited to wordsmithing of a document. Michael Schrage in a splendid book called *Shared Minds* notes, prototypes do this by creating not only new ways to look at things but to talk about them as well:

The prototype becomes the vocabulary of the innovation, and each successive prototype enlarges the vocabulary and deepens both designer and customer understanding...

These rapid prototypes aren't one shot deals: they aren't frozen in final form. They're collaborative learning and designing tools. They're visual and conversational stimuli.

They're a medium of expression. You can play with them; turn them upside down or spin them on their axis...They are also highly malleable and manipulable; it's easy to tinker with, edit, or alter them.

3. *Key assumptions can get tested before it is costly or impossible to change them. When there is time to deal with problems.* All new programs or tools are built on a series of premises that may or may not be accurate. For every legendary tale of how assumptions broke down in the private sector there is an equal example in government. Here's one:

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A year was spent designing a program for homeless women with kids in New York City. It was then implemented by retrofitting a large building in upstate New York to create apartments for women and children to occupy while a job training program ensued. Millions were spent and the doors opened. Few came. The assumption that, because the program was “tailored to their needs” women would rush to it, did not hold up. Retrospective analysis showed that while the mothers met homeless criteria, their kids were rooted in schools and local activities. The household unit had no desire to move. How much better to have prototyped the concept with a two-unit apartment rented for one month to try the idea with two households!

Some generic premises are especially important to affirm:

--If we build it, they will come. *Our customers can't wait to use this new software. to track their projects.*

--If they come, they will find great value. *We know just what they need to hold great community workdays.*

--If they find it of value, they will achieve more. *So many people liked it so much we can call it a great success.*

How many times have these assumptions failed to hold up? It can easily turn out that a product appears far more to its makers than its users. That what people value and use is often different than how the designers see it. That high customer satisfaction does not translate to results from using something.

4. *Prototypes save time and build energy.* How many persons are more excited at the fourth meeting to plan a new initiative than at the first? If the second meeting features a few persons who report on what they put to first use, ears and eyes perk up. Most of us are more energized by acting than by discussing. Even more we are energized by the evident enthusiasm of those leading the innovations. These are the early adopters to anything new—the “Go First” people.

Positive energy is also critical to overcome several forms of resistance. One is the quest for consensus among planners. Let's not act until we all agree. Another is the aversion to letting users see pieces of the program before they are complete or perfected. The irony is that shortfalls cannot be discovered until someone actually tests a solution and gets the customer experience of actual engagement.

So during the planning, try something new and build on what works!