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Confessions of a Product Development Consultant

Jose Campos, a partner in Rapidinnovation, LLC reveals some of the painful truths stirring in the technology product development space.

1. In your experience with many technology companies, what are the highest leverage initiatives that a technology company can undertake to accelerate product development?

Accelerating product development is a key objective of fast-moving technology companies, but it is meaningless if it one does not achieve the financial objectives of the company.

There are clearly three things that stand above everything else your can do to speed up product development:

- First, customer intimacy --creating the urge and acquiring the skills for engineers, marketing and other functions to get close to the customers, to clearly understand their stated and unstated needs.
- Second, a model of Program Management for product development. In an industry where technology changes continually, where the turn over of people is high and companies change directions rapidly; you need someone, i.e., a Program Manager to focus on delivering products on time and on profit
- Finally, a robust model of portfolio management is essential. Having a good engineering team is of little help if the wrong products get selected for development or too many products overload the engineering department.

2. Why are Customer Intimacy, Program Management and Portfolio Management so important to you?

If you boil down the key drivers for a product development organization you find four key ingredients -- speed, concurrency, repeatability and business objectives. Customer Intimacy, Program Management and Portfolio Management are essential to achieving all the key drivers.

What actual models would you recommend?

There are many that are tried and true. Most important though, is the realization that the only model that will work is that which management is willing to commit for the long term.

Another important consideration is that “cookie cutter” and “instant pudding” models do not work. It takes work and time to embed the practice in the culture of the organization. As I said, there are many tried-and-true models that can be used. The test is commitment and adapting the model to the realities of the organization.

3. What should companies avoid doing?

Too much rigidity. Technology companies live in an ever-changing environment. It does not make sense to have processes that are so rigid that they become an obstacle to rapid product development. Here is where wisdom and experience come into play. It is a difficult balance to achieve between process orientation for repeatability and at the same time flexibility to what is right.

4. Anything else that should be avoided?

Assuming that a tool or a piece of software will significantly speed up product development. I like to think that the tools are 20% of the issue. People have 80% of the leverage, and that is where the focus should occur. Unstoppable teams are so, not because a new software application, but because people are energized and motivated to deliver results.

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5. What are some of the more disturbing trends you find in your consulting practice

Forsaking quality, value and other key attributes for the sake of speed. Companies, for example, that skip talking to the customer because that saves time to market. Another is the elimination of the QA department in a software company, for the sake of speed. As absurd as that sounds, I have encountered both cases.

I fully understand the pressure to get products to market, but I suspect that customers assume that things like value, ease of use and quality are not sacrificed. There are ways to accelerate development, but disposing of indispensable activities is not one of them.

6. Anything else companies can do to improve product development?

Employees have become much more insightful and can detect the bull when they hear it. Management must “walk the proverbial talk.” For example, if customer focus is the theme, why do managers spend so little time with customers? How about the ever popular “our employees are our most important assets?” We are in the business of talent. This trend will continue for the foreseeable future. Management must make the hiring, nurturing and retention of talent a core competency for the enterprise, lest the competition drain the resources. Finally, employees that are motivated and engaged are much more creative and productive.

7. What trends do you see in product development?

The pressure for speed will not abate any time soon. With a globalization of business, competition will increase. I also expect that the need for cross-functional optimization for product development will become painfully evident. This means increased reliance in program management, leadership skills, matrix skills and cross-functional teams

8. What else do you see coming?

Distributed or virtual teams will become commonplace for product development. In a global market place, it's a natural for product development to take place around the world and around the clock. Linux is a good example of virtual development. We

will see the growth of collaborative software such as teamware that is optimized for product development. Program Managers will need to become aware of diversity to ensure that teams from different companies in different countries work together towards a common goal. Believe it or not, in the virtual team environment, there is often a greater level of communication and understanding between team members in different countries than team members from different corporate cultures.

9. What are your greatest sources of satisfaction?

By far, the creativity and innovation that can be unleashed if team members have the right environment. Regrettably, we may fail to realize that people make things happen. I have been immensely surprised by how creative the human mind can be if properly motivated.