

On Becoming a Software Engineer

Once there existed a newly graduated engineer named Fred. Above all else, Fred had come to appreciate the beauty in writing elegant and efficient code. Knowing that he lacked wisdom, he approached a wise master for advice. “Oh Wise Master,” Fred asked, “How may I become a software engineer?” The Wise Master looked deep into the heart of Fred, and saw his sincerity. “There are three tasks you must complete. If you are willing to undertake these tasks, I can teach you. Are you willing?” “Yes, Oh Wise Master. I yearn to gain wisdom.” “Very well,” the Wise Master said. “You must first master the Morass of Meetings. This is your first task.”

Fred first attempted to slay the Morass. He tried to shorten and even kill them. However, all was for naught. As he tried to shorten meetings, they inexplicably became longer. When he tried to kill the meetings, much like a Hydra, two sprang up from each one that was killed. Fred began to realize that each meeting had a purpose, and until the purpose was met, the meeting could not be slain. In time, Fred learned to embrace meetings, for in meetings, kernels of wisdom could be found. He learned to balance joint application design sessions, preliminary design reviews, critical design reviews, user acceptance meetings, and architectural reviews. He spent much time using e-mail to organize and arrange meetings learning to respond in a timely fashion to all manner of unreasonable requests.

After Fred mastered the Morass, he returned to the Wise Master. “Oh Wise Master,” he said, “I have learned to glean understanding from the Morass of Meeting, and discern wisdom from folly. I have found balance in scheduling meetings back-to-back, and I have even learned to fight the dreaded creeping waistline found in each meeting’s den of doughnuts. I am ready for the next task.” The Wise Master saw that indeed Fred had mastered the Morass, and replied, “Your second task is to tame the Tangle of Incomplete User Requirements.”

Fred labored long and hard to simply uncover the Tangle, for many user requirements were frequently obscure and tried to hide from the light of day. Many were not apparent, and required discernment to uncover. Nevertheless, Fred persevered and by virtue of hard work and long hours was able to tame the Tangle of Incomplete and Inconsistent User Requirements. He was proud of his achievement, and returned to the Wise Master to demonstrate his prowess.

The Wise Master was impressed, but cautioned Fred saying, “You have indeed mastered the Morass of Meetings and tamed the Tangle of Incomplete and Inconsistent User Requirements. However, these two tasks were to give you courage so that you would not be faint of heart for the last task: Juggling Conflicting and Changing Requirements and Priorities.” Fred trembled at these words, but did not deter from his mission.

Fred found out that every class of user had conflicting priorities. Every user had changing requirements. Fred also discovered, much to his dismay, that often the budget and schedule were also conflicting. Even the very management that first set him forth in his labor often changed their priorities daily. Fred initially set out to make all users happy, but soon realized that making one happy often made all the others unhappy. Each user had a specific priority, and each priority seemed in direct contrast to all others. Fred eventually realized that no one user would ever be totally happy—the best that could be accomplished was to try and not make any one user totally unhappy. This “not unhappy” concept filled him with wonder, as he learned to tradeoff “not unhappiness” in one class of user for more “not unhappiness” in another. His efforts were herculean, but eventually he no longer feared for his life when confronting users. He learned that when requirements and priorities changed, he needed to arrange more meetings and fight the demons of incompleteness and inconsistency. In times of great despair, he found solace in a magic elixir of coffee, antacids, beta blockers, and aspirin.

At long last, Fred felt happy with his progress, and returned to the Wise Master. “Oh Wise Master,” he exclaimed, “I have succeeded in the three tasks that you laid out for me. I have learned to master the Morass of Meetings. I fought long and hard, and by dint of effort, managed to tame the Tangle of Incomplete and Inconsistent User Requirements. And—by the sweat of my brow and gnashing of teeth—I have even discovered the path to Juggling Conflicting and Changing Requirements and Priorities. I have demonstrated my worthiness in accomplishing all of these tasks. Now, oh great master, I am ready! At last, impart to me your secrets of becoming a software engineer!”

“Why Fred,” the Wise Master exclaimed, “do you not see? You have been a software engineer all along! As you have accomplished each of these three tasks, you have found your true path to becoming a great software engineer!”

“But,” Fred interrupted, “I have had no time to write code. When do I write code?”

“Code?” the Wise Master thundered in anger. “Oh, you want to write code? Why didn’t you say so? That’s totally different. It has nothing to do with the tasks I gave you!”

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Shamelessly adapted from an idea I found at <http://www.jokes4teachers.com/J0145.php> (no author was given).