Cabbies and Techies: Brothers in Pain

Big-name consultants often say that buggy or late software is usually not the fault of coders and program managers, but the fault of upper-level managers. But how could people no more involved in the day-to-day affairs of software engineering than the average turnip be responsible for sabotaging software projects? There's no need to ask a high-priced software consultant: Ask a cab driver.

Software Executive *(stepping into cab at 4:50):* Driver, I have a meeting at my hotel at 5:00. Step on it!

Crusty Big-City Cabbie: Where are ya stayin', pal?

E: Room 420. The bed's nice, but the shower controls are confusing. Nice convention facilities, though. Go!

C: Right. We'll head off in any old direction 'till we see the hotel with the funny shower knobs. But maybe I can get you there faster if you give me some more information, like the color of your bedspread.

E: This is no time for jokes. Start working on that 5:00 deadline and we'll work out the "where" as we go.

C *(pulling away):* Wait a minute ... you gotta hard deadline and no useful directions for me—that'd make you a software executive, right? Your convention's at the Marriott. I can't get you there 'till maybe 5:15.

E: Unacceptable! But with my help we'll easily cut out those extra 15 minutes. First, we'll eliminate any nonvalue-added elements from your driving process—

C: It's rush hour, pal, and this cab ain't no #@!% helicopter. We ain't goin' five miles in 10 minutes.

E: As if you had any data to back that up. Ten minutes requires a net speed of only 30 miles per hour, and the speed limit on this road is 35. I'm calling my client on my cell phone to tell her we'll be early.

C: Yeah, and while you're at it, you can tell her your cab driver is the Easter Bunny.

(one minute later)

E: Driver! Why are we sitting still? I'm not seeing any visible signs of progress!

C: It's called a red light, buddy. Whenever I see one, I just gotta stop and admire it.

E: Work harder! This is an unproductive activity! Hit the gas! Move! Move!

C: Right, pal. We'll just drive over the top of this police car up here and continue on our merry way.

E: That's the can-do attitude I need to see! Well, what are you waiting for? Do it!

C: Aw, the light turned green. Now I'll never get to bunk with my cousin Larry at the state pen.

E: That's not my fault. And you—stop hitting those red lights. A competent driver should know how to avoid them. I'm calling my client to tell her we'll be there at 5:01, thanks to you.

C: Blow it out your ear, buddy.

(30 seconds later)

E: Hold it! Why are we turning? My map shows the street we were on is the most direct! Turn around!

C: We're takin' the parkway. And stop micromanagin' me, ya chump. I know what I'm doin'.

E: And I know you're not the one paying for this cab fare—stop wasting time and get back on that road.

C *(turning cab around):* Tell ya what: You give the directions, and I'll charge by the minute—I can use the extra dough. But shut yer yap, or I'm adding a surcharge for not beatin' ya with that briefcase.

(At 5:00)

E: It's 5:00! Why aren't we there?

C: 'Cuz ya didn't hail a cab at 4:30, ya nitwit.

E: How did you ever keep this job, missing deadlines like this? And look, another red light! I'm losing patience with you!

C: YOU'RE losing patience? Gimme that briefcase—

E: I'm calling my client to tell her we'll be there at 5:05. Your tip is shrinking by the minute!

C: So's your life expectancy! Shaddap!

(Much later)

C: Well, Mr. I'm-Paying-So-I'm-Right, thanks to your brilliant navigation, we made it by 6:04.

E *(getting out):* I wasn't the one stopping at all those red lights! Here's 10 bucks. Keep the change.

C: Whoa, pal! Your fare is $83.50!

E: Wrong—that fare is completely outside my cost plan. Plus, it's over 57 times the cost of a subway fare, and I'm assessing penalties for missing your deadline. A smarter cabbie would have gotten me here by 5:00.

C: A smarter cabbie would have run you over on sight, buddy. Gimme my fare before I get any smarter!

Woman Exiting Hotel *(to executive):* Oh, there you are. I was just on my way to dinner.

E: I would have been here at 5:00 if it weren't for this incompetent cab driver.

W: Don't worry about it. I work with software executives all the time, so I wasn't expecting you until 7:00.

E: Let's do a dinner meeting then. *(To cabbie)* I was at a great restaurant here in town the other night—some kind of ethnic food. They had waiters and tablecloths and menus—the whole nine yards. Take us there.

C: You ain't goin' nowhere 'till I get my $83.50.

E: Fine, be that way. Here's $100. On second thought, I think I know where it is. Just follow my directions.

C: If you're navigating, forget it. I gotta have the cab in the garage by midnight.

— Lorin May

Got an idea for BACKTALK? Send an E-mail to backtalk@stsc1.hill.af.mil