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The change request trap

Serious about outcomes. Not serious about ourselves.

The change request was not unexpected.

> ***A change request is a formal acknowledgement that the original specification was wrong. It is also a commercial mechanism — a way for the vendor to charge for the work that should have been included in the original scope, and a way for the client to request the thing they needed but did not know how to ask for. It is not a sign that something has gone unexpectedly wrong. It is a sign that the project was specified before it was understood.***

It was inevitable from the day the specification was signed.

1. The Anatomy of a Change Request

Every change request has a before and an after. Before: a specification that described what the system would do. After: a discovery that the specification was incomplete, incorrect, or based on an assumption that turned out to be false.

The commercial context of this discovery matters. The power dynamic at change request stage is not the same as the power dynamic at procurement stage. When the specification was being written, the client had choices. By the time the first substantive change request arrives, the client has invested in the relationship, committed to a go-live date, and is in no position to walk away. The vendor knows this. The change request is priced accordingly.

2. The Volume Problem

A single change request is a correction. Five change requests is a pattern. Ten change requests means the specification was not fit for purpose.

Most implementations with significant CR volumes reach that volume not through a series of genuinely unforeseeable events, but through the systematic underspecification of a small number of critical areas: integration points, exception handling, and reporting requirements.

> None of these are surprises in retrospect. They are the same underspecified areas in every implementation. The vendor has seen them before. The consulting firm has seen them before. The client has not. The asymmetry of experience is one reason these areas remain underspecified: the party with the most incentive to specify them thoroughly is the party least likely to flag the gap before the contract is signed.

3. The Contract Behind the Change Request

The change request mechanism does not operate in isolation. It is supported by the contract. A well-drafted vendor contract places the risk of specification incompleteness on the client: the vendor delivers what was specified, and if what was specified is not what was needed, that is a scope change. Scope changes are change requests.

What many clients do not examine carefully enough at contract stage is the definition of 'specification'. In most vendor contracts, this definition is limited to the signed document. Verbal representations made during the sales process, demonstrations of functionality, and commitments made in pre-contract workshops are explicitly excluded.

The change request is not a failure of process. It is the process. The original specification was always going to be incomplete. The vendor knew this. The consultant knew this. The client suspected it but could not say so.

The CR mechanism is the commercial structure that converts that incompleteness into revenue. It does not need to be dishonest to be effective.

It only needs to exist.

4. Reducing CR Exposure

CR exposure is not eliminated by a tighter contract. A tighter contract produces a more defensive vendor, a more adversarial relationship, and the same change requests priced differently. CR exposure is reduced by completing the discovery before the specification is written.

Three mechanisms that reduce CR volume in practice:

One. Specification sign-off by the people who will use the system, not only the people who commissioned it — including explicit sign-off on the handling of the twenty most common workflow exceptions.

Two. Integration mapping completed and agreed before the contract is signed, with third-party system owners included in that process, not added later.

Three. A contract definition of 'specification' that explicitly includes demonstrated functionality, pre-contract commitments, and any functionality referenced in the sales process — and a vendor willing to sign it.

Every change request is a discovery session that happened too late.

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