

Comparatively Speaking

by Michael Bolton

WHILE I WAS WAITING IN LINE AT THE bank last week, I overheard a conversation between one of the tellers and a customer.

“What’s the best account for me to open?”

“Well, it depends on what you want.”

“I want to open the *best* account you have. Which one should I open?”

“Sir, it depends on what your goals are. To manage your cash flow, we have checking accounts that give you detailed monthly statements and low charges for checks and automatic withdrawals. For a high interest rate on your deposits, we can offer you savings accounts. Credit card accounts also can be useful; they have differing interest rates and differing payment terms, depending on your needs. Or, if you’re interested in buying a house, we offer fixed-rate or floating-rate mortgages. The choice is yours.”

The question about the best bank account sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? Yet, many customers ask me about “industry best practices” as though there is a single software industry or practices that are “best” in all contexts.

Jerry Weinberg suggests that when we hear comparative words such as “fast,” “expensive,” or “good” we should immediately ask, “compared to what?” So when we hear “best,” we should ask:

“Best” for whom? Each existing practice provides benefit to *some part* of the organization. Who’s asking for best practices? Who will get the benefits? Who will be required to adapt?

“Best” for achieving what goals? If our organization is achieving some goal today, aren’t we already using a best practice? What goals might require different practices? How might those practices have an impact on the goals we’re achieving now?



Michael Bolton has his own theory of relativity.

“Best” according to whom? Do the people who are proffering the “best practice” understand our business? Do they even *care* about our business? Are they selling us something? Do they have an axe to grind?

“Best” as measured by what yardstick? Do we measure things in the same way as those recommending the practice? How will we know when the best practice is providing benefits? Are we willing to reject the practice if we don’t see benefits?

“Best” in what context? Who are the people already using the practice? Are they really using it? Is their business really the same as ours? If we want to be the same as these people, why aren’t we already that way?

“Best” at what cost? Would what we need to apply—time, money, effort, or staff—and what we may have to give

up—flexibility, time to market, or, in the case of some Agile processes, accountability—be worth it, or might it undermine the reasons that we’ve been successful so far?

All things—cars, movies, bank accounts, processes—have attributes that someone values. Someone may disagree, for perfectly valid reasons, with anyone who identifies anything as “best.” Practices should be our servants, helping us get the job done, and not our masters, dictating what we must do. On their own, our practices don’t produce anything; our people do. Hmmm . . . isn’t it odd that no one has ever asked me about “best people” methodologies? **{end}**

Michael Bolton is based in Toronto and trains software testers all over North America. He confesses to misgivings about the new title of this magazine—but he’s glad that it isn’t called Best Software.

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