Clarion Review

Technology

Progressive Steps: A Novel Approach to Effective Software Upgrades

Craig Poulson
Alison Brown
CreateSpace
978-1-4664-9395-7
Four Stars (out of Five)

Storytelling is a strategy that has become standard practice in business books. Increasingly, authors write about leadership, management, employee motivation, or other seemingly dry business topics by telling a story. The most successful of these books include many of the elements of fiction: good characters, an interesting story line, a little humor, and a solid dose of drama. *Progressive Steps*, in which authors Craig Poulson and Alison Brown weave a tale that any software development team could appreciate, does an admirable job of following this formula.

Chuck is a senior player on a development team in an unnamed company that creates software for clients. Early on, he learns from his manager that a software implementation will need to be done on Thanksgiving weekend. The demoralized development team grumbles about working on Thanksgiving, which spurs Chuck and a coworker to come up with an idea for improving the workflow process that could potentially save the holiday for everyone. The challenge, of course, is that Chuck's boss and, more importantly, the company's senior management have to sign off on the significant change to the way business has always been conducted.

Poulson and Brown create a believable plot with good characters that keep the action moving swiftly. (Jess, an Australian developer with a devilish sense of humor, is particularly endearing.) The descriptions of the workplace, employee interactions, and corporate politics are all too realistic. A nice touch is the window into Chuck's personal life. Chuck demonstrates that he is a committed father, but it is apparent that he struggles with the work/life balance. In fact, his wife chides him about missing the Thanksgiving holiday and ultimately plants in his head the idea about conceiving a new development process.

The real purpose of *Progressive Steps* is to lobby for a development process that literally occurs in progressive steps. This is a concept that ties in quite nicely with Lean, a way of doing business that focuses on customer value and production efficiency. As such, the underlying message of the book is relevant and timely.

At times, the story might stretch the limits of believability. For example, the role Chuck's wife plays in his epiphany is a bit overdone, and the way all of the story's loose ends are tied up feels a little contrived.

Still, there is a real lesson to be learned here, and readers who participate at any level in developing software, or any product for that matter, should find something to gain from the book. In the end, *Progressive Steps* manages to make a serious point, by way of an entertaining story, about software development. And that's no easy task.

Barry Silverstein