Zombie Projects

by Bill Poston

A recent Harvard Business Review article suggested that resources for new innovation initiatives in most companies could easily be freed up simply by killing a portion of what the authors called “Zombie Projects,” initiatives that lurk in the unsanctioned shadows of the organization. In firms without a disciplined portfolio management process, the zombies are often running the show.

I recently performed an innovation portfolio review for a high tech company that told me they had 75 active projects in their product development pipeline. Seemed like an easy enough task and a manageable number of initiatives to characterize and analyze. By that time we were finished cataloging all of the projects that people in development were dedicating time to, we had passed the 350 mark. Almost 80% of their projects were not on their sanctioned and funded list. These projects represented close to half of the resource consumption in product development.

If you think that this is an extreme example that does not represent your organization, you might be wise to check. As the name suggests, zombies are very hard to kill. I have sat through many a portfolio review where executives have asked the question, “Why is this project still in the pipeline? We agreed to kill it during our last meeting.” Bring your zombies into the light of day and see if they can withstand the same scrutiny you apply to the projects you consciously select.

I am not against some unstructured work or providing lots of flexibility in the early stages of exploration, but there comes a time in the innovation cycle where a concept has to stand on its own merits to continue to receive an allocation of resources from the company. Beware of the zombies sucking the life out of your innovation portfolio.

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