The Essence of Software Engineering
In every block of marble I see a statue as plain as though it stood before me, shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls that imprison the lovely apparition to reveal it to the other eyes as mine see it.

—Michelangelo

Standing on the shoulders of a giant...
We are liberating the essence from the burden of the whole.

—Ivar Jacobson
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Chapter 3 A 10,000-Foot View of the Full Kernel  23
  3.1 Organizing the Kernel  24
  3.2 The Essential Things to Progress and Evolve:
      The Alphas  25
  3.3 The Essential Things to Do: The
      Activities  32
  3.4 Competencies  35
  3.5 Finding Out More about the Kernel  36

Chapter 4 The Kernel Alphas Made Tangible with
   Cards  37
  4.1 Using Cards As Aids to Address a Specific
      Challenge: An Example  38
  4.2 Making the Kernel Come Alive  41

Chapter 5 Providing More Details to the Kernel through
   Practices  43
  5.1 Making a Practice Explicit  44
  5.2 How Explicit Should Practices Be?  45
  5.3 Building Methods from Practices  47
  5.4 Learning Methods and Practices  48

Chapter 6 What the Kernel Can Do for You  51
  6.1 Developing Great Software  52
  6.2 Growing  54
  6.3 Learning  55
  6.4 Evolving  55

Further Reading  56
PART II USING THE KERNEL TO RUN AN ITERATION  59

Chapter 7 Running Iterations with the Kernel: Plan-Do-Check-Adapt  61
  7.1 Terminology Used  61
  7.2 Plan-Do-Check-Adapt  62
  7.3 Setting the Scene  64
  7.4 The Focus for the Next Few Chapters  66

Chapter 8 Planning an Iteration  69
  8.1 Planning Guided by Alpha States  70
  8.2 Determining the Current State in Our Story  73
  8.3 Determining the Next State in Our Story  73
  8.4 Determining How to Achieve the Next States in Our Story  73
  8.5 How the Kernel Helps You in Planning Iterations  78

Chapter 9 Doing and Checking the Iteration  79
  9.1 Doing and Checking the Iteration with the Kernel  79
  9.2 Doing and Checking the Iteration in Our Story  81
  9.3 How the Kernel Helps You in Doing and Checking the Iteration  84
Chapter 10  Adapting the Way of Working  87
10.1  Adapting the Way of Working with the Kernel  87
10.2  Adapting the Way of Working in the Story  88
10.3  How the Kernel Helps You in Adapting the Way of Working  90

Chapter 11  Running an Iteration with Explicit Requirement Item States  93
11.1  Working with Explicit Requirement Items  93
11.2  Planning an Iteration in Our Story  95
11.3  Doing Another Iteration in Our Story  97
11.4  Adapting the Way of Working in Our Story  100
11.5  Discussion  102
Further Reading  103

PART III  USING THE KERNEL TO RUN A SOFTWARE ENDEAVOR  105

Chapter 12  Running a Software Endeavor: From Idea to Production  107
12.1  The People in Our Story and Challenges along the Way  107
12.2  Understanding the Organizational Context  109
Chapter 13 Building the Business Case  111
13.1  Getting Ready to Start in Our Story  111
13.2  Understanding the Opportunity and the Stakeholders  115
13.3  Understanding the Solution  117
13.4  Preparing to Do the Work  119
13.5  Establishing a High-Level Plan  121
13.6  Building the Schedule  125
13.7  How the Kernel Helps You in Getting Started  128

Chapter 14 Developing the System  131
14.1  Building the Skinny System—Getting Things Working  135
14.2  Engaging the Stakeholders  136
14.3  Starting Development  138
14.4  Establishing an Agreed-on Way of Working  139
14.5  Making the Skinny System Usable—Getting Things Working Well  143
14.6  Keeping the Stakeholders Involved  144
14.7  Evolving a Usable System  146
14.8  Getting to a Good Way of Working  148
14.9  Evolving a Deployable Solution—Concluding the Work  149
14.10  Gaining Acceptance  151
14.11  Getting to Delivery  152
14.12  Done! Completing Development Work  154
14.13 How the Kernel Helps You Develop Great Software 156

Chapter 15 Operating the Software 157
15.1 Setting the Scene 157
15.2 Going Live—Successfully Deploying the System 161
15.3 Deploying the System 162
15.4 Handing Over between the Two Teams 164
15.5 Supporting the System until Retirement 167
15.6 Our Story Ends 170
Further Reading 170

PART IV SCALING DEVELOPMENT WITH THE KERNEL 173

Chapter 16 What Does It Mean to Scale? 175

Chapter 17 Zooming In to Provide Details 179
17.1 Making Practices Precise for Inexperienced Members 180
17.2 An Example: A Requirements Elicitation Practice 182
17.3 An Example: An Acceptance Testing Practice 184
17.4 Understanding How Practices Work Together 186
17.5 Value of Precise Practices 188
Chapter 18 Reaching Out to Different Kinds of Development 191
18.1 Agreeing on the Practices to Use 192
18.2 Adapting to Your Development Life Cycle 193
18.3 Building a Method Incrementally during Development 194
18.4 Methods in Large Organizations 197
18.5 Putting Teams in Control of Their Methods 198

Chapter 19 Scaling Up to Large and Complex Development 201
19.1 An Example of Large Development 202
19.2 Organizing Work Using the Alphas 204
19.3 Visualizing Development with the Alphas 208
19.4 Coordinating the Development Teams through Alphas 210
19.5 Empowering Teams to Scale 212
Further Reading 213

PART V HOW THE KERNEL CHANGES THE WAY YOU WORK WITH METHODS 215

Chapter 20 Thinking about Methods without Thinking about Methods 217
20.1 You Think about Methods All the Time 218
20.2 Doing Rather Than Discussing 219
Chapter 21 Agile Working with Methods  221
  21.1 The Full Team Owns Their Method, Rather Than a Select Few  222
  21.2 Focus on Method Use Rather Than Comprehensive Method Description  223
  21.3 Evolve Your Team’s Method, Rather Than Keeping Your Method Fixed  224

PART VI WHAT’S REALLY NEW HERE?  227

Chapter 22 Refounding Methods  229
  22.1 Not a Lack of Methods, but a Lack of a Foundation—a Kernel  229
  22.2 The Kernel Values Practicality  230
  22.3 The Kernel Is Actionable and Extensible  232

Chapter 23 Separation of Concerns Applied to Methods  235
  23.1 Separating the Kernel from Practices  236
  23.2 Separating Alphas from Work Products  237
  23.3 Separating the Essence from the Details  238

Chapter 24 The Key Differentiators  241
  24.1 Innovations with Methods  241
  24.2 Practical Tools for Software Teams and Professionals  242
PART VII EPILOGUE 245

Chapter 25 This Is Not the End 247

Chapter 26 . . . But Perhaps It Is the End of the Beginning 249

Chapter 27 When the Vision Comes True 253
  27.1 The Software Professional 253
  27.2 The Industry 254
  27.3 The Academic World 255
  27.4 An Exciting Future 256

Further Reading 257

APPENDIXES 259

Appendix A Concepts and Notation 261

Appendix B What Does This Book Cover with Respect to the Kernel? 263
  B.1 Inside the Kernel, and Inside This Book 263
  B.2 Outside the Kernel, but Inside This Book 264
  B.3 Inside the Kernel, but Outside This Book 265

Appendix C Bibliography 267
  C.1 SEMAT Working Documents 267
C.2 SEMAT: Other Documents and References 268
C.3 Other References 270

About the Authors 271
What People Are Saying about This Book 275
Index 287
The pendulum has swung again. This time it has swung toward craftsmanship. As one of the leaders of the craftsmanship movement, I think this is a good thing. I think it is important that software developers learn the pride of workmanship that is common in other crafts.

But when the pendulum swings, it often swings away from something else. And in this case it seems to be swinging away from the notion of engineering. The sentiment seems to be that if software is a craft, a kind of artistry, then it cannot be a science or an engineering discipline. I disagree with this rather strenuously.

Software is both a craft and a science, both a work of passion and a work of principle. Writing good software requires both wild flights of imagination and creativity, as well as the hard reality of engineering tradeoffs. Software, like any other worthwhile human endeavor, is a hybrid between the left and right brain.

This book is an attempt at describing that balance. It proposes a software engineering framework or kernel that meets the need for engineering discipline, while at the same time leaving the development space open for the creativity and emergent behavior needed for a craft.

Most software process descriptions use an assembly line metaphor. The project moves from position to position along the line until it is complete. The prototypical process of this type is the
waterfall, in which the project moves from Analysis to Design to Implementation. In RUP the project moves from Inception to Elaboration to Construction to Transition.

The kernel in this book represents a software development effort as a continuously operating abstract mechanism composed of components and relationships. The project does not move from position to position within this mechanism as in the assembly line metaphor. Rather, there is a continuous flow through the mechanism as opportunities are transformed into requirements, and then into code and tests, and then into deployments.

The state of that mechanism is exposed through a set of critical indicators, called *alphas*, which represent how well the underlying components are functioning. These alphas progress from state to state through a sequence of actions taken by the development team in response to the current states.

As the project progresses, the environment will change, the needs of the customer will shift, the team will evolve, and the mechanism will get out of kilter. The team will have to take further actions to tune the mechanism to get it back into proper operation.

This metaphor of a continuous mechanism, as opposed to an assembly line, is driven by the agile worldview. Agile projects do not progress through phases. Rather, they operate in a manner that continuously transforms customer needs into software solutions. But agile projects can get out of kilter. They might get into a mode where they aren’t refactoring enough, or they are pairing too much, or their estimates are unreliable, or their customers aren’t engaged.

The kernel in this book describes the critical indicators and actions that allow such malfunctions to be detected and then corrected. Teams can use it to tune their behaviors, communications, workflows, and work products in order to keep the machine running smoothly and predictably.
The central theme of the book is excellent. The notion of the alphas, states, and actions is compelling, simple, and effective. It’s just the right kind of idea for a kernel. I think it is an idea that could help the whole software community.

If you are deeply interested in software process and engineering, if you are a manager or team leader who needs to keep the development organization running like a well-oiled machine, or if you are a CTO in search of some science that can help you understand your development organizations, then I think you’ll find this book very interesting.

After reading the book, I found myself wanting to get my hands on a deck of cards so that I could look through them and play with them.

—Robert Martin
(unclebob)
February 2012
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Foreword
by Bertrand Meyer

Software projects everywhere look for methodology and are not finding it. They do, fortunately, find individual practices that suit them; but when it comes to identifying a coherent set of practices that can guide a project from start to finish, they are too often confronted with dogmatic compendiums that are too rigid for their needs. A method should be adaptable to every project’s special circumstances: it should be backed by strong, objective arguments; and it should make it possible to track the benefits.

The work of Ivar Jacobson and his colleagues, started as part of the SEMAT initiative, has taken a systematic approach to identifying a “kernel” of software engineering principles and practices that have stood the test of time and recognition. Building on this theoretical effort, they describe project development in terms of states and alphas. It is essential for the project leaders and the project members to know, at every point in time, what is the current state of the project. This global state, however, is a combination of the states of many diverse components of the system; the term *alpha* covers such individual components. An alpha can be a software artifact, like the requirements or the code; a human element, like the project team; or a pure abstraction, like the opportunity that led to the idea of a project. Every alpha has, at a particular time, a state; combining all these alpha states defines the state of the project. Proper project management and success requires knowing this state at every stage of development.
The role of the kernel is to identify the key alphas of software development and, for each of them, to identify the standard states through which it can evolve. For example, an opportunity will progress through the states Identified, Solution Needed, Value Established, Viable, Addressed, and Benefits Accrued. Other alphas have similarly standardized sets of states.

The main value of this book is in the identification of these fundamental alphas and their states, enabling an engineering approach in which the project has a clear view of where it stands through a standardized set of controls.

The approach is open, since it does not prescribe any particular practice but instead makes it possible to integrate many different practices, which do not even have to come from the same methodological source—like some agile variant—but can combine good ideas from different sources. A number of case studies illustrate how to apply the ideas in practice.

Software practitioners and teachers of software engineering are in dire need of well-grounded methodological work. This book provides a solid basis for anyone interested in turning software project development into a solid discipline with a sound engineering basis.

—Bertrand Meyer
March 2012
Foreword
by Richard Soley

Software runs our world; software-intensive systems, as Grady Booch calls them, are the core structure that drives equity and derivative trading, communications, logistics, government services, management of great national and international military organizations, and medical systems—and even allows elementary school teacher Mr. Smith to send homework assignments to little Susie. Even mechanical systems have given way to software-driven systems (think of fly-by-wire aircraft, for example); the trend is not slowing, but accelerating. We depend on software, and often we depend on it for our very lives. Amazingly, more often than not software development resembles an artist’s craft far more than an engineering discipline.

Did you ever wonder how the architects and builders of the great, ancient temples of Egypt or Greece knew how to build grand structures that would stand the test of time, surviving hundreds, or even thousands of years, through earthquakes, wars, and weather? The Egyptians had amazing mathematical abilities for their time, but triangulation was just about the top of their technical acumen. The reality, of course, is that luck has more to do with the survival of the great façade of the Celsus Library of Ephesus, in present-day Selçuk, Turkey, than any tremendous ability to understand construction for the ages.

This, of course, is no longer the case. Construction is now civil engineering, and civil engineering is an engineering discipline. No one would ever consider going back to the old
hand-designed, hand-built, and far more dangerous structures of the distant past. Buildings still fail in the face of powerful weather phenomena, but not at anywhere near the rate they did 500 years ago.

What an odd dichotomy, then, that in the design of some large, complex systems we depend on a clear engineering methodology, but in the development of certain other large, complex systems we are quite content to depend on the ad hoc, hand-made work of artisans. To be sure, that’s not always the case; quite often, stricter processes and analytics are used to build software for software-intensive systems that “cannot” fail, where more time and money is available for their construction; aircraft avionics and other embedded systems design is often far more rigorous (and costly) than desktop computing software.

Really, this is more of a measure of the youth of the computing field than anything else, and the youth of our field is never more evident than in the lack of a grand unifying theory to underpin the software development process. How can we expect the computing field to have consistent software development processes, consistently taught at universities worldwide, consistently supported by software development organizations, and consistently delivered by software development teams, when we don’t have a globally shared language that defines the software development process?

It is worth noting, however, that there is more than one way to build a building and more than one way to construct software. So the language or languages we need should define quarks and atoms instead of molecules—atomic and subatomic parts that we can mix and match to define, carry out, measure, and improve the software development process itself. We can expect the software development world to fight on about agile versus non-agile development, and traditional team-member
programming versus pair programming, for years to come; but we should demand and expect that the process building blocks we choose can be consistently applied, matched, and compared as necessary, and measured for efficacy. That core process design language is called Essence. Note that, in fact, in this book there is a “kernel” of design primitives that are themselves defined in a common language; I will leave this complication for the authors to explain in detail.

In late 2009, Ivar Jacobson, Bertrand Meyer, and I came together to clarify the need for a widely accepted process design kernel and language and to build an international team to address that need. The three of us came from quite different backgrounds in the software world, but all of us have spent time in the trenches slinging code, all of us have led software development teams, and all of us have tried to address the software complexity problem in various ways. Our analogies have differed (operatic ones being quite noticeably Prof. Meyer’s), our team leadership styles have differed, and our starting points have been quite visibly different. These differences, however, led to an outstanding international cooperation called Software Engineering Method and Theory, or SEMAT. The Essence kernel, a major Object Management Group (OMG) standards process, and this book are outputs of this cooperative project.

Around us a superb team of great thinkers formed, meeting for the first time at ETH in Zürich two years ago, with other meetings soon afterward. That team has struggled to bring together diverse experiences and worldviews into a core kernel composed of atomic parts that can be mixed and matched, connected as needed, drawn on a blueprint, analyzed, and put into practice to define, hire, direct, and measure real development teams. As I write this, the OMG is considering how to capture the work of this team as an international software development
standard. It’s an exciting time to be in the software world, as we transition from groups of artisans sometimes working together effectively, to engineers using well-defined, measured, and consistent construction practices to build software that works.

The software development industry needs and demands a core kernel and language for defining software development practices—practices that can be mixed and matched, brought on board from other organizations, measured, integrated, and compared and contrasted for speed, quality, and price. Soon we’ll stop delivering software by hand; soon our great software edifices will stop falling down. SEMAT and Essence may not be the end of that journey to developing an engineering culture for software, and they certainly don’t represent the first attempt to do so; but they stand a strong chance of delivering broad acceptance in the software world. This thoughtful book gives a good grounding in ways to think about the problem, and a language to address the need; every software engineer should read it.

—Richard Mark Soley, Ph.D.
38,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean
March 2012
Preface

Everyone who develops software knows that it is a complex and risky business, and is always on the lookout for new ideas that will help him or her develop better software. Luckily, software engineering is still a young and growing profession—one that sees new innovations and improvements in best practices every year. These new ideas are essential to the growth of our industry—just look at the improvements and benefits that lean and agile thinking have brought to software development teams.

Successful software development teams need to strike a balance between quickly delivering working software systems, satisfying their stakeholders, addressing their risks, and improving their way of working. For that, they need an effective thinking framework—one that bridges the gap between their current way of working and any new ideas they want to take on board. This book presents such a thinking framework in the form of an actionable kernel—something we believe will benefit any team wishing to balance their risks and improve their way of working.

INspiration

This book was inspired by, and is a direct response to, the SEMAT Call for Action. It is, in its own way, one small step in the process to refound software engineering.

SEMAT (Software Engineering Method and Theory) was founded in September 2009 by Ivar Jacobson, Bertrand Meyer, and Richard Soley, who felt the time had come to fundamentally change the way people work with software development methods. Together they wrote a call for action, which in a few lines
Software engineering is gravely hampered today by immature practices. Specific problems include:

- The prevalence of fads more typical of a fashion industry than of an engineering discipline
- The lack of a sound, widely accepted theoretical basis
- The huge number of methods and method variants, with differences little understood and artificially magnified
- The lack of credible experimental evaluation and validation
- The split between industry practice and academic research

We support a process to refound software engineering based on a solid theory, proven principles and best practices that:

- Include a kernel of widely-agreed elements, extensible for specific uses
- Address both technology and people issues
- Are supported by industry, academia, researchers and users
- Support extension in the face of changing requirements and technology

Figure P-1  Excerpt from the SEMAT Call for Action

identifies a number of critical problems with current software engineering practice, explains why there is a need to act, and suggests what needs to be done. Figure P-1 is an excerpt from the SEMAT Call for Action.

The call for action received a broad base of support, including a growing list of signatories and supporters. The call for action’s assertion that the software industry is prone to fads and fashions has led some people to assume that SEMAT and its supporters are resistant to new ideas. This could not be further from the truth. As you will see in this book, they are very keen on new ideas—in fact, this book is all about some of the new ideas coming from SEMAT itself. What SEMAT and its supporters are against is the non-lean, non-agile behavior that comes from

1. The current list can be found at www.semat.org.
people adopting inappropriate solutions just because they believe these solutions are fashionable, or because of peer pressure or political correctness.

In February 2010 the founders developed the call for action into a vision statement. In accordance with this vision SEMAT then focused on two major goals:

1. Finding a kernel of widely agreed-on elements
2. Defining a solid theoretical basis

To a large extent these two tasks are independent of each other. Finding the kernel and its elements is a pragmatic exercise requiring people with long experience in software development and knowledge of many of the existing methods. Defining the theoretical basis requires academic research and may take many years to reach a successful outcome.

THE POWER OF THE COMMON GROUND

SEMAT’s first step was to identify a common ground for software engineering. This common ground is manifested as a kernel of essential elements that are universal to all software development efforts, and a simple language for describing methods and practices. This book provides an introduction to the SEMAT kernel, and how to use it when developing software and communicating between teams and team members. It is a book for software professionals, not methodologists. It will make use of the language but will not dwell on it or describe it in detail.

The kernel was first published in the SEMAT OMG Submission. As shown in Figures P-2 and P-3, the kernel contains a

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2. The SEMAT Vision statement can be found at the SEMAT website, www.semat.org.
Figure P-2 Things to work with

Figure P-3 Things to do
small number of “things we always work with” and “things we always do” when developing software systems. There is also work that is ongoing, with the goal of defining the “skills we always need to have,” but this will have to wait until future versions of the kernel and is outside the scope of this book.4

We won’t delve into the details of the kernel here as this is the subject of Part I, but it is worth taking a few moments to think about why it is so important to establish the common ground in this way. More than just a conceptual model, as you will see through the practical examples in this book, the kernel provides

• A thinking framework for teams to reason about the progress they are making and the health of their endeavors
• A framework for teams to assemble and continuously improve their way of working
• A common ground for improved communication, standardized measurement, and the sharing of best practices
• A foundation for accessible, interoperable method and practice definitions
• And most importantly, a way to help teams understand where they are and what they should do next

THE BIG IDEA

What makes the kernel anything more than just a conceptual model of software engineering? What is really new here? This can be summarized into the three guiding principles shown in Figure P-4.

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4. A kernel with similar properties as the SEMAT kernel was first developed at Ivar Jacobson International in 2006 (www.ivarjacobson.com). This kernel has served as an inspiration and an experience base for the work on the SEMAT kernel.
The Kernel Is Actionable

A unique feature of the kernel is how the “things to work with” are handled. These are captured as alphas rather than work products (such as documents). An alpha is an essential element of the software engineering endeavor, one that is relevant to an assessment of its progress and health. As shown in Figure P-2, SEMAT has identified seven alphas: Opportunity, Stakeholders, Requirements, Software System, Work, Way of Working, and Team. The alphas are characterized by a simple set of states that represent their progress and health. As an example, the Software System moves through the states of Architecture Selected, Demonstrable, Usable, Ready, Operational, and Retired. Each state has a checklist that specifies the criteria needed to reach the state. It is these states that make the kernel actionable and enable it to guide the behavior of software development teams.

The kernel presents software development not as a linear process but as a network of collaborating elements; elements that need to be balanced and maintained to allow teams to progress effectively and efficiently, eliminate waste, and develop great software. The alphas in the kernel provide an overall framework for driving and progressing software development efforts, regardless of the practices applied or the software development philosophy followed.
As practices are added to the kernel, additional alphas will be added to represent the things that either drive the progress of the kernel alphas, or inhibit and prevent progress from being made. For example, the Requirements will not be addressed as a whole but will be progressed requirement item by requirement item. It is the progress of the individual requirement items that will drive or inhibit the progress and health of the Requirements. The requirement items could be of many different types—for example, they could be features, user stories, or use-case slices, all of which can be represented as alphas and have their state tracked. The benefit of relating these smaller items to the coarser-grained kernel elements is that it allows the tracking of the health of the endeavor as a whole. This provides a necessary balance to the lower-level tracking of the individual items, enabling teams to understand and optimize their way of working.

**The Kernel Is Extensible**

Another unique feature of the kernel is the way it can be extended to support different kinds of development (e.g., new development, legacy enhancements, in-house development, offshore, software product lines, etc.). The kernel allows you to add practices, such as user stories, use cases, component-based development, architecture, pair programming, daily stand-up meetings, self-organizing teams, and so on, to build the methods you need. For example, different methods could be assembled for in-house and outsourced development, or for the development of safety-critical embedded systems and back office reporting systems.

The key idea here is that of practice separation. While the term *practice* has been widely used in the industry for many years, the kernel has a specific approach to the handling and sharing of practices. Practices are presented as distinct, separate, modular
units, which a team can choose to use or not to use. This contrasts with traditional approaches that treat software development as a soup of indistinguishable practices and lead teams to dump the good with the bad when they move from one method to another.

**The Kernel Is Practical**

Perhaps the most important feature of the kernel is the way it is used in practice. Traditional approaches to software development methods tend to focus on supporting process engineers or quality engineers. The kernel, in contrast, is a hands-on, tangible thinking framework focused on supporting software professionals as they carry out their work.

For example, the kernel can be touched and used through the use of cards (see Figure P-5). The cards provide concise reminders and cues for team members as they go about their daily tasks. By providing practical checklists and prompts, as opposed to conceptual discussions, the kernel becomes something the team uses on a daily basis. This is a fundamental difference from

![Figure P-5](image-url)

**Figure P-5** Cards make the kernel tangible.
traditional approaches, which tend to overemphasize method description as opposed to method use and tend to only be consulted by people new to the team.

THE KERNEL IN ACTION

Although the ideas in this book will be new to many of you, they have already been successfully applied in both industry and academia.

Early adopters of the kernel idea\footnote{In all cases they used the kernel and practices developed by Ivar Jacobson International.} include the following.

- MunichRe, the world’s leading reinsurance company, where a family of “collaboration models” have been assembled to cover the whole spectrum of software and application work. Four collaboration models have been built on the same kernel from the same set of 12 practices. The models are Exploratory, Standard, Maintenance, and Support.

- Fujitsu Services, where the Apt Toolkit has been built on top of an early version of the software engineering kernel, including both agile and waterfall ways of working. A major Japanese consumer electronics company, whose software processes have been defined on top of an early version of the kernel, allowing the company to help teams apply new practices and manage their offshore development vendor.

- KPN, where a kernel-based process was adopted by more than 300 projects across 13 programs as part of a move to iterative development. The kernel also provided the basis for a new result-focused QA process, which could be applied to all projects regardless of the method or practices used.
• A major UK government department, where a kernel-based agile toolset was introduced to enable disciplined agility and the tracking of project progress and health in a practice-independent fashion.

The kernel is already being used in first- and second-year software engineering courses at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Sweden.

• The first-year courses were run by Anders Sjögren. After the students conducted their projects, Anders and the students went through the SEMAT alphas and matched them to their project results. Here, the students had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with and evaluate the alphas as well as gain insight into the project’s progress and health.

• The second-year courses were run by Mira Kajko-Mattsson. Here, the students were requested to actively use the SEMAT kernel when running their projects along with the development method they followed. Mira created an example software development scenario and evaluated the scenario for each alpha, its states, and the state checklist items. The students were then requested to do the same when conducting and evaluating their projects.

The courses taught the students the following lessons.

• The kernel assures that all the essential aspects of software engineering are considered in a project. By matching the project results against the kernel alphas, the students can easily identify the good and bad sides of their development methods.
• The kernel prepares students for future software engineering endeavors with minimal teaching effort. Because they had to follow all the kernel alphas, the students could learn the total scope of the software engineering endeavor and thereby know what will be required of them in their professional careers.

**HOW DOES THE KERNEL RELATE TO AGILE AND OTHER EXISTING APPROACHES?**

The kernel can be used with all the currently popular management and technical practices, including Scrum, Kanban, risk-driven iterative, waterfall, use-case-driven development, acceptance-test-driven development, continuous integration, test-driven development, and so on. It will help teams embarking on the development of new and innovative software products and teams involved in enhancing and maintaining mature and established software products. It will help teams of all sizes from one-man bands to thousand-strong software engineering programs.

For example, the kernel supports the values of the Agile Manifesto. With its focus on checklists and results, and its inherent practice independence, it values individuals and interactions over processes and tools. With its focus on the needs of professional software development teams, it values teams working and fulfilling team responsibilities over the following methods.

The kernel doesn’t in any way compete with existing methods, be they agile or anything else. On the contrary, the kernel is agnostic to a team’s chosen method. Even if you have already chosen, or are using, a particular method the kernel can still help you. Regardless of the method used, as Robert Martin has pointed out in his Foreword to this book, projects—even agile ones—can get out of kilter, and when they do teams need to know more. This
is where the real value of the kernel can be found. It can guide a team in the actions to take to get back on course, to extend their method, or to address a critical gap in their way of working. At all times it focuses on the needs of the software professional and values the “use of methods” over the “description of method definitions” (as has been normal in the past).

The kernel doesn’t just support modern best practices. It also recognizes that a vast amount of software is already developed and needs to be maintained; it will live for decades and it will have to be maintained in an efficient way. This means the way you work with this software will have to evolve alongside the software itself. New practices will need to be introduced in a way that complements the ones already in use. The kernel provides the mechanisms to migrate legacy methods from monolithic waterfall approaches to more modern agile ones and beyond, in an evolutionary way. It allows you to change your legacy methods practice by practice while maintaining and improving the team’s ability to deliver.

HOW THE KERNEL WILL HELP YOU

Use of the kernel has many benefits for you as an experienced or aspiring software professional, and for the teams you work in. For example, it provides guidance to help you assess the progress and health of your software development endeavors, evaluate your current practices, and improve your way of working. It will also help you to improve communication, move more easily between teams, and adopt new ideas. And it will help the industry as a whole by improving interoperability between teams, suppliers, and development organizations.

By providing a practice-independent foundation for the definition of software methods, the kernel also has the power to completely transform the way methods are defined and practices
are shared. For example, by allowing teams to mix and match practices from different sources to build and improve their way of working, the kernel addresses two of the key methodological problems facing the industry.

1. Teams are no longer trapped by their methods. They can continuously improve their way of working by adding or removing practices as and when their situation demands.

2. Methodologists no longer need to waste their time describing complete methods. They can easily describe their new ideas in a concise and reusable way.

Finally, there are also benefits for academia, particularly in the areas of education and research. The kernel will provide a basis for the creation of foundation courses in software engineering, ones that can then be complemented with additional courses in specific practices—either as part of the initial educational curriculum or later during the student’s further professional development. Equally as important is the kernel’s ability to act as a shared reference model and enabler for further research and experimentation.

**HOW TO READ THIS BOOK**

This book is intended for anyone who wants to have a clear frame of reference when developing software, researching software development, or sharing software development experiences.

For software professionals the goal of this book is to show how the kernel can help solve challenges you face every day when doing your job. It demonstrates how the kernel is used in different situations from small-scale development to large-scale development.
For students and other aspiring software professionals, the goal of the book is to illustrate some of the challenges software professionals face and how to deal with them. It will provide you with a firm foundation for further study and help you learn what you otherwise only learn through experience.

The book is organized to allow gradual learning, and concepts are introduced and illustrated incrementally. We hope this book will be useful to software professionals, educators, and students, and we look forward to your feedback.

The book is structured into seven short parts.

Part I: The Kernel Idea Explained
An overview of the kernel with examples of how it can be used in practice.

Part II: Using the Kernel to Run an Iteration
A walkthrough of how the kernel can be used to run an iteration.

Part III: Using the Kernel to Run a Software Endeavor
A description of how you can use the kernel to run a complete software endeavor—for example, a project of some size—from idea to production.

Part IV: Scaling Development with the Kernel
A demonstration of how the kernel is flexible in supporting different practices, organizations, and domains.

Part V: How the Kernel Changes the Way You Work with Methods
Takes a step back and discusses the principles for you to apply the kernel effectively and successfully to your specific situation.

Part VI: What’s Really New Here?
A summary of the highlights and key differentiators of SEMAT and this book.
Part VII: Epilogue

A forward-looking discussion of how we can get even more value from the kernel in the future.

FURTHER READING


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Acknowledgments

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The art of planning an iteration is in deciding which of the many things the team has to do should be done in this iteration—the next two to four weeks. Every iteration will produce working software, but there are other things the team needs to think about. They need to make sure they develop the right software in the best way they can. The kernel helps the team reason about the current development context, and what to emphasize next, to make sure a good balance is achieved across the different dimensions of software development.

You can think of planning an iteration as follows.

1. *Determine where you are.* Work out the current state of the endeavor.

2. *Determine where to go.* Decide what to emphasize next, and what the objectives of the next iteration will be.

3. *Determine how to get there.* Agree on the tasks the team needs to do to achieve the objectives.

In our story, because of the way the team chose to run their iterations, the iteration objectives were put into the team’s iteration backlog and broken down into more detailed tasks. In this way the iteration backlog served as the team’s to-do list. We will
now look at how Smith and his team used the alphas to guide the planning and execution of an iteration.

**8.1 PLANNING GUIDED BY ALPHA STATES**

When you plan an iteration the alphas can help you understand where you are and where to go next. By aligning the objectives they set for each iteration, Smith’s team made sure they progressed in a balanced and cohesive way. This relationship between the alphas, and the objectives and tasks in the iteration backlog, is illustrated in Figure 8-1.

**8.1.1 Determine Where You Are**

When preparing for an iteration, the first step is to understand where you are. This involves, among other things, understanding details relating to technology, risks, quality, and stakeholder needs. But it is also important to have a shared understanding of where you are with the software endeavor as a whole, and this is where the kernel can help.

![Figure 8-1 Working from the tasks and objectives in an iteration backlog](image)
There are a number of ways you can use the kernel to do this. If you are using alpha state cards, as discussed in Part I, you can do this as follows.

- **Walkthrough:** This is a simple approach using one set of cards.
  1. Lay out the cards for each alpha in a row on a table with the first state on the left and the final state on the right.
  2. Walk through each state and ask your team if you have achieved that state.
  3. If the state is achieved, move that state card to the left. Continue with the next state card until you get to the state that your team has not yet achieved.
  4. Move this state card and the rest of the pending state cards to the right.

- **Poker:** Another approach that sometimes works better is poker.
  1. Each member is given a deck of state cards.
  2. For each alpha, each member selects the state card that he or she thinks best represents the current state of the software development endeavor.
  3. All members put their selected state card face down on the table.
  4. When all are ready, they turn the state card face up.
  5. If all members have selected the same state card, then there is consensus.
  6. If the selected state cards are different, it is likely there are different interpretations of the checklists for the states. The team can then discuss the checklists for the state to reach an agreement.
Using state cards is not required to use the kernel, but they are a useful tool to get the team members to talk, and to discuss what state the endeavor is in and what state they need to focus on next.

Once you have determined the current state of the endeavor, you can start discussing what the next set of states to be achieved should be.

8.1.2 Determine Where to Go

Identifying a set of desired alpha states guides the team in determining what to emphasize in an iteration. In fact, the iteration objective can be described as reaching a set of target alpha states.

Once the team has determined the current state of their alphas, it is fairly easy to select which of the next states they should target in their next iteration. The target states make well-formed objectives as their checklists provide clearly defined completion criteria.

Selecting the target states can easily be done as an extension to the walkthrough and poker techniques described in the preceding section.

8.1.3 Determine How to Get There

After identifying a candidate set of objectives for the iteration, the team has to decide how they will address them and whether or not they can achieve them in the iteration timebox. Typically this is done by identifying one or more tasks to be completed to achieve the objective.

Again the alpha states help the team with the checklist for each state providing hints as to what tasks they will need to do to achieve the objective. In this part of the book we are just considering a small software endeavor. Later in the book we will discuss how you identify tasks and measure progress on more complex efforts.
8.2 DETERMINING THE CURRENT STATE IN OUR STORY

Smith and his team were six weeks into development. They had provided an early demonstration of the system to their stakeholders. Angela and the other stakeholders were pleased with what they saw, and they gave valuable feedback. However, the system was not yet usable by end users.

Smith started the iteration planning session with a walkthrough to determine the current state. Figure 8-2 shows the states they had achieved on the left, and the states not yet achieved on the right.

Table 8-1 shows the current states for the alphas and describes how the team in our story achieved them.

8.3 DETERMINING THE NEXT STATE IN OUR STORY

Once the team had agreed on the current alpha states, the team discussed what the next desired “target” states were to guide its planning. The team agreed to use the immediate next alpha states to help establish the objectives of the next iteration. These are shown in Figure 8-3.

In most cases, the name of the alpha state itself provides sufficient information to understand the state. But if needed, team members can find out more by reading the alpha state checklist. By going through the states one by one for each alpha, a team quickly gets familiar with what is required to achieve each state. In this way the team learns about the kernel alphas at the same time as they determine their current state of development and their next target states.

8.4 DETERMINING HOW TO ACHIEVE THE NEXT STATES IN OUR STORY

Smith and his team looked at the next target states and agreed that some prioritization was needed. In this case, they needed
Smith’s team had demonstrated an early version of the application based on an initial set of requirements. After the demonstration, the stakeholders agreed that the understanding of the requirements was acceptable.

The agreed-on requirement items were online and offline browsing of the social network, and making posts offline. However, these requirement items were only partially implemented at the time of the demonstration. According to the state definition, our team has achieved the Requirements: Acceptable state.

Smith’s team had identified the critical technical issues for the software system and outlined the architecture. This had allowed them to achieve the Software System: Architecture Selected state. Moreover, Smith’s team had demonstrated an early version of the system to their stakeholders. This means that Smith’s team had achieved the Software System: Demonstrable state. However, since Smith’s team had not completed enough functionality to allow users to employ the system on their own, Smith’s team had not yet achieved the Software System: Usable state.

The two new members, Dick and Harriet, who had just come on board were not fully productive yet. In particular, they seemed to have trouble with the approach to automated testing, which the team agreed was important to maintain high quality during development. They had difficulty identifying good test cases and writing good test code. As such, the team agreed that the Way of Working is currently in the In Place state. But they had not yet achieved the Working Well state.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current State</th>
<th>How It Was Achieved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Requirements</strong></td>
<td>Smith’s team had demonstrated an early version of the application based on an initial set of requirements. After the demonstration, the stakeholders agreed that the understanding of the requirements was acceptable. The agreed-on requirement items were online and offline browsing of the social network, and making posts offline. However, these requirement items were only partially implemented at the time of the demonstration. According to the state definition, our team has achieved the Requirements: Acceptable state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Software System</strong></td>
<td>Early during development, Smith’s team had identified the critical technical issues for the software system and outlined the architecture. This had allowed them to achieve the Software System: Architecture Selected state. Moreover, Smith’s team had demonstrated an early version of the system to their stakeholders. This means that Smith’s team had achieved the Software System: Demonstrable state. However, since Smith’s team had not completed enough functionality to allow users to employ the system on their own, Smith’s team had not yet achieved the Software System: Usable state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Way of Working</strong></td>
<td>The two new members, Dick and Harriet, who had just come on board were not fully productive yet. In particular, they seemed to have trouble with the approach to automated testing, which the team agreed was important to maintain high quality during development. They had difficulty identifying good test cases and writing good test code. As such, the team agreed that the Way of Working is currently in the In Place state. But they had not yet achieved the Working Well state.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Conceived

- The need for a new system is clear
- Users are identified
- Initial sponsors are identified

#### Bounded

- The purpose and extent of the system are agreed on
- Success criteria are clear
- Mechanisms for handling requirements are agreed on
- Constraints and assumptions are identified

#### Coherent

- The big picture is clear and shared by all involved
- Priorities are clear
- Conflicts are addressed
- Impact is understood

#### Acceptable

- Requirements describe a solution acceptable to the stakeholders
- The rate of change to agreed-on requirements is low
- Value is clear

### Addressed

- Enough requirements are implemented for the system to be acceptable
- Stakeholders agree the system is worth making operational

### Fulfilled

- The system fully satisfies the requirements and the need
- There are no outstanding requirement items preventing completion

### Architecture Selected

- Architecture selected that addresses key technical risks
- Criteria for selecting architecture agreed on
- Platforms, technologies, and language selected
- Buy, build, and reuse decisions made

#### Demonstrable

- Key architecture characteristics demonstrated
- Relevant stakeholders agree architecture is appropriate
- Critical interface and system configurations exercised

### Usable

- System is usable and has desired characteristics
- System can be operated by users
- Functionality and performance have been tested and accepted
- Defect levels acceptable
- Release content known

### Ready

- User documentation available
- Stakeholder representatives accept system
- Stakeholder representatives want to make system operational
- System supported to agreed-on service levels

### Operational

- System in use in operational environment
- System available to intended users
- At least one example of system is fully operational
- System supported to agreed-on service levels

### Retired

- System no longer supported
- Updates to system will no longer be produced
- System has been replaced or discontinued

### Principles Established

- Principles and constraints established
- Principles and constraints committed to
- Practices and tools agreed to
- Context team operates in understood

#### Foundation Established

- Key practices and tools ready
- Gaps that exist between practices and tools analyzed and understood
- Capability gaps analyzed and understood
- Selected practices and tools integrated

#### In Use

- Some members of the team are using the way of working
- Use of practices and tools regularly inspected
- Practices and tools being adapted and supported by team
- Procedures in place to handle feedback

### In Place

- All members of team are using way of working
- All members have access to practices and tools to do their work
- Whole team involved in inspection and adaptation of way of working

### Working Well

- Way of working is working well for team
- Team members are making progress as planned
- Team naturally applies practices without thinking about them
- Tools naturally support way of working

### Retired

- Way of working is no longer in use by team
- Lessons learned are shared for future use

---

**Figure 8-2** The team uses the alphas to determine the current states.
to first get to the Way of Working: Working Well state, then the Software System: Usable state, and finally the Requirements: Addressed state. The reason was simple: If their way of working did not work well, this would impede their attempts to get the software system usable. In addition, they agreed on the priority for the missing requirement items necessary to achieve the Requirements: Addressed state.

Smith and his team next discussed what needed to be done to achieve these states (see Table 8-2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target State</th>
<th>How They Planned to Achieve Them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>□ Way of Working</td>
<td>Both Dick and Harriet agreed that they had difficulties in applying automated testing. They needed help in order to make progress. Tom agreed that he had to spend time teaching them. A task was added to the iteration backlog for Tom to conduct training on automated testing for Dick and Harriet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8-2 How the Team Planned to Achieve the Selected Target States (continued)

This state reminds us that the software system must be shown to be of sufficient quality and functionality to be useful to the users. So far, Smith’s team had been testing within its development environment. Now it had to conduct tests within an acceptance test environment, which they had yet to prepare. This resulted in the following task:

Task 2. Prepare acceptance test environment.

Smith’s team had to bring all requirement items currently demonstrable in the system to completion. By “complete” they meant that each requirement item must be fully tested within the acceptance test environment.

Task 3. Complete requirement item A: “Browse online and offline”.

Task 4. Complete requirement item B: “Post comment (online and offline)”. 

Task 5. Complete requirement item C: “Browse album”.

This state reminds us of the need to work with stakeholders to ensure that they are happy with the system produced. In our story Smith had to work with Angela to determine which additional requirement items needed to be implemented. This resulted in the following additional task:

Task 6: Talk to Angela and agree on additional requirement items, fitting in the iteration, to make the system worth being operational.

By going through the target alpha states, Smith was able to determine a set of objectives and tasks for the next iteration.
8.5 HOW THE KERNEL HELPS YOU IN PLANNING ITERATIONS

A good plan must be inclusive, meaning that it includes all essential items and covers the whole team. It must also be concrete, so it is actionable for the team. The team must also have a way to monitor its progress against the plan. The kernel helps you achieve this as follows.

- **Inclusive:** The kernel alphas serve as reminders across the different dimensions of software development, helping you to create a plan that addresses all dimensions in a balanced way.

- **Concrete:** The checklists for each alpha state give you hints as to what you need to do in the iteration. The same checklists help you determine your progress by making clear what you have done and comparing this to what you intended to do.
Index

A
ABET (Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology), 255
Academia
  kernel adoption by, xxxvi
  kernel benefits, xxxix
  kernel impact on, 255–257
Acceptable state
  in acceptance testing practice, 185
  alpha cards for, 40
  composed practices, 187
  in developing systems, 146
  in planning iterations, 74
  in requirements, 19–20, 29–30
Acceptance in developing systems, 134, 151–152
Acceptance Test Cases work product, 184–186
Acceptance Test Results work product, 184–185
Acceptance testing practice, 181, 184–185
Acceptance testing team, 203
Accepted state, 97, 102
Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), 255
Activities and activity spaces
  for alpha state progression, 184
  overview, 32–34
  terminology and notation, 261
Adapt phase in Plan-Do-Check-Adapt cycle
  description, 64
  in large development, 209
Addressed state
  in acceptance testing practice, 185
  alpha cards for, 40
  in developing systems, 147, 152
  in planning iterations, 76–77
  in requirements, 19, 29, 31
  in way of working, 89
Adjourned state
  in system support, 170
  in team handover, 166
Agile Manifesto, xxxvii–xxviii, 221
Agile methods
  benefits, 79
  working with, 221–225
Agree on Acceptance Test Cases work product, 188
Agree on What Is of Value to Users activity, 45, 182–184
  in acceptance testing practice, 184
  in composed practices, 187
Agreed-on elements, 3
Agreed-on way of working establishing, 139–143
   in skinny systems, 133
Alpha definition cards, 38–39
Alpha state cards, 40–41
Alphas, xxxii–xxxiii, 13–14
   in business case, 114–115
cards for, 37–42
checklist, 29
development team coordination through, 210–212
introduction, 14–17
in large development, 209–210
in method building, 196–197
overview, 25–32
as practical tools, 242
scope of, 17, 31
separating from work products, 237–238
states. See States
terminology and notation, 261
Analyst competency, 36
Apt Toolkit, xxv
Architecture alpha in method building, 196
Architecture forum in large development, 206–207
Architecture issues in business case, 127
Architecture Selected state, 114, 118
Areas of concern, 24–25
   in business case, 113
   in deployment, 161–162
   in developing systems, 135–136, 143–144, 150
   Successfully Deployed milestone, 159
   in system support, 167–168
Authors, kernel benefits for, 55

B
Background for explicit practices, 46
Backlog-driven development practices in method building, 196
Backlogs
   iteration, 62
   in large development, 206–207
Benefit Accrued state
   in deployment, 164
   in system support, 169
Bibliography, 267–270
Bounded requirements
   addressing, 9
   alphas, 19–20, 29–30
   in business case, 118
   in large development, 204
Bounded state
   alpha cards for, 40–41
   in business case, 114
Business case
   challenges, 117
guiding development, 128–129
   opportunity, 115–117
   overview, 111–114
   planning, 121–125, 129
   schedule, 125–128
   solution, 117–119
   stakeholders, 115–117, 128
   work preparation, 119–121
Business needs, 6

C
Call for Action, xxvii–xxix, 247
Capabilities for explicit practices, 46
Cards
   for alphas, 37–42
   benefits, xxxiv–xxxv
   for business case, 122–123
for planning iterations, 71–72
as practical tools, 242
Challenges
addressed by kernel, 6–11
business case, 117
methods, 217
scaling, 175–178
software development, 3–5
software endeavors, 107–108
Check phase in Plan-Do-Check-
Adapt cycle
description, 64
in large development, 209
Churchill, Winston, 249
Closed state
in system support, 170
in team handover, 166
Coherent state
alpha cards for, 40–41
in developing systems, 138–139
in requirements, 19–20, 29–30
Collaborating state
in developing systems, 141
in team handover, 165
Collaboration in teams, 10
Collaboration models, xxxv
Collaborative forums vs. top-
down hierarchies, 204
Common ground
learning and training based
on, 48
for software engineering,
xxix–xxx
Competencies
overview, 35–36
requirement for, 4
terminology and notation, 262
Completing developing systems,
154–156
Complexity of software develop-
ment, 4–5
Component alpha in method
building, 196
Composition of practices,
186–188
Conceived state
alpha cards for, 40–41
in business case, 118
in large development, 204
in requirements, 18, 20, 29
Concepts and notation, 261–262
Concluded state in developing
systems, 155
Concrete graphical syntax, 231
Concrete plans, 78
Conduct user demos activity, 45
Coordinate activity space, 34
Coordination
of development teams through
alphas, 210–212
in large development, 202
Coordination forum, 203,
208–209
Criteria for alpha states, 27–28
Critical requirement items,
211–212
Cross-company mobility, 254
Crosscutting requirement items,
212
Current state determination,
73–75
Curricula
kernel benefits, xxxvi–xxxvii,
xxxix
kernel impact on, 256
vision for, 250
Curriculum Guidelines for Under-
graduate Degree Programs in
Software Engineering, 255
Customer area of concern
in business case, 113
in deployment, 161–162
description, 24–25
in developing systems, 135–136, 143–144, 150
Successfully Deployed milestone, 159
in system support, 167–168
Customer representatives
competency, 35
responsibilities, 65
Customer value team, 203, 206

Deployable systems, evolving, 149–151
Deploying systems, 161–164
Described state, 94–96, 99
Design software engineering curricula, kernel impact on, 256
Design teams in large development, 202
Details, separating essence from, 238–239
Developers
business case, 117
competency, 36
and methods, 48
responsibilities, 65
Developing systems
acceptance, 151–152
agreed-on way of working, 139–143
completing, 154–156
delivery, 152–154
evolving deployable systems, 149–151
evolving usable systems, 146–148
good way of working, 148–149
overview, 131–135
skinny systems, 133–135, 138–139
stakeholders, 136–137, 144–146
starting, 138–139
Development
kernel for, 52–54
visualizing with alphas, 208–210
Development life cycles, 193–194
Development teams
coordinating through alphas, 210–212
in large development, 203

Daily meetings in iteration process, 80
Decision points in organizational context, 109
Decision to Fund milestone, 109
Decision to Go Live milestone
in business case, 122
in developing systems, 151
in organizational context, 109
Delivery in developing systems, 134, 152–154
Demonstrable software systems, 10, 21
Demonstrable state
in developing systems, 137–138
in planning iterations, 74
Demonstrated state in large development, 208
Department manager responsibilities, 65
Deploy the system activity space, 34
Deployable solutions in developing systems, 134

Details, separating essence from, 238–239
Developers
business case, 117
competency, 36
and methods, 48
responsibilities, 65
Developing systems
acceptance, 151–152
agreed-on way of working, 139–143
completing, 154–156
delivery, 152–154
evolving deployable systems, 149–151
evolving usable systems, 146–148
good way of working, 148–149
overview, 131–135
skinny systems, 133–135, 138–139
stakeholders, 136–137, 144–146
starting, 138–139
Development
kernel for, 52–54
visualizing with alphas, 208–210
Development life cycles, 193–194
Development teams
coordinating through alphas, 210–212
in large development, 203

Deployable systems, evolving, 149–151
Deploying systems, 161–164
Described state, 94–96, 99
Design software engineering curricula, kernel impact on, 256
Design teams in large development, 202
Details, separating essence from, 238–239
Developers
business case, 117
competency, 36
and methods, 48
responsibilities, 65
Developing systems
acceptance, 151–152
agreed-on way of working, 139–143
completing, 154–156
delivery, 152–154
evolving deployable systems, 149–151
evolving usable systems, 146–148
good way of working, 148–149
overview, 131–135
skinny systems, 133–135, 138–139
stakeholders, 136–137, 144–146
starting, 138–139
Development
kernel for, 52–54
visualizing with alphas, 208–210
Development life cycles, 193–194
Development teams
coordinating through alphas, 210–212
in large development, 203
Do phase in Plan-Do-Check-Adapt cycle
description, 63–64
in large development, 209
Doing and checking iterations, 79–85
Doing column in iteration task boards, 80–84
Done column in iteration task boards, 80–84

E
Early adopters, xxxv–xxxvi
Education
kernel benefits, xxxvi–xxxvii, xxxix
kernel impact on, 255–256
vision for, 250
Endeavor area of concern
in business case, 114
in deployment, 161–162
description, 24–25
in developing systems, 135–136, 143–144, 151
in system support, 168
Engineering courses, xxxvi–xxxvii
Engineers, method, 222
Enhancement requirements, 17, 20
Ensure stakeholder satisfaction activity space, 33
Entertainment application
requirements in large development, 202–203, 210
Essence, separating from details, 238–239
Essential things to do, 32
Essentials, learning and training focused on, 48
Evolving
deployable systems, 149–151
kernel for, 52, 55–56
methods, 224–225, 237
usable systems, 146–148
Existing approaches, kernel relationship to, xxxvii–xxviii
Explicit practices, 44–47
Explicit requirement item states
in iteration planning, 95–97
task boards, 97–100
working with, 93–95
Explicit way of working, 90–91
Explore possibilities activity space, 33
Extensible kernels, xxxiii–xxxiv, 232–233

F
Fads, xxviii
Feature Lists, 182, 186
Formal semantics, 231
Formed state in developing systems, 141
Foundation Established state
in business case, 114
in developing systems, 140
Fujitsu Services company, xxxv
Fulfilled state
in acceptance testing practice, 185
alpha cards for, 40
in deployment, 163
in developing systems, 153
in explicit requirement items, 96–97, 100
in requirements, 19, 29, 31
Funding in organizational context, 109
Future, 256–257

G
Gaining acceptance in developing systems, 134
General application requirements
in large development, 202–203, 210
Getting to delivery in developing systems, 134
Good way of working in developing systems, 148–149
Growth, kernel for, 52, 54–55
Guiding development in business case, 128–129

H
Handover between teams, 164–167
Health, kernel focus on, 53
High-level plans in business case, 121–125

I
Identified state
in business case, 115
in explicit requirement items, 94–96
Implement the system activity space, 34
Implemented state in explicit requirement items, 94–96
In Agreement state in developing systems, 137, 145
In Place state
in developing systems, 141
in planning iterations, 74
In Use state in developing systems, 140
Inclusive plans, 78
Incremental method building, 194–197
Industry, kernel impact on, 254–255
Initiated state in business case, 120
Innovations with methods, 241–242
Intuitive graphical syntax, 231
Involved state in developing systems, 137, 145
Iteration alpha in method building, 196
Iterations
backlogs, 62
doing and checking, 79–85
explicit requirement items, 93–100
objectives, 62, 84
Plan-Do-Check-Adapt cycle, 61–67
planning. See Planning iterations
terminology, 61–62

J
Jacobson, Ivar
contributions, 271
grand vision, 247
SEMAT founding by, xxvii
Just-in-time approach, 194

Kajko-Mattsson, Mira, xxxvi
Kernel
actionable feature, xxxii–xxxiii, 232–233
activities, 32–34
alphas. See Alphas
areas of concern, 24–25
benefits, xxxvii–xxxix, 51–52
challenges addressed by, 6–11
competencies, 35–36
eyearly adopters, xxxv–xxxvi
engineering courses, xxxvi–xxxvii
essentials, 5–6
extensible feature, xxxiii–xxxiv, 232–233
measurement approaches, 53
practical feature, xxxiv–xxxv, 231
practices. See Practices
principles, xxxi–xxv
provisions, xxxi
relationship to existing
approaches, xxxvii–xxviii
separating from practices, 236–237
simple language, 180
stable, 236–237
terminology and notation, 261
usage and extension, 263–264
vision for, 250
Key differentiators
innovations with methods, 241–242
practical tools, 242–243
KPN company, xxxv
KTH Royal Institute of Technology, xxxvi

L
Language
constructs, 265
simple, 180
vision for, 250
Large development, 201–202
coordinating, 210–212
example, 202–203
methods, 197–199
organizing work, 204–208
visualizing, 208–210
Leadership competency, 36
Learning
kernel for, 52, 55
methods and practices, 48–49
Lidman, Svante, contributions by, 272
Life cycles
adapting, 193–194
description, 63–64
in large development, 209

M
Maintenance, 158
Martin, Robert, xxxvii
McMahon, Paul E., contributions by, 271
Measurement approaches, 53
Meetings in iteration process, 80
Methods, 44. See also Practices
with Agile, 221–225
building, 192–193
challenges, 217
defined, 191
doing rather than discussing, 219
evolving, 224–225, 237
incremental building, 194–197
innovations with, 241–242
in large organizations, 197–199
learning, 48–49
from practices, 47–48
in reaching out, 177
refounding, 229–233
separation of concerns, 235–239
team control, 198, 200
team ownership, 222–223
terminology and notation, 261
thinking about, 218–219
use focus vs. description, 223–224, 231
Meyer, Bertrand
grand vision, 247
SEMAT founding by, xxvii
Milestones
  in business case, 121–124, 127
  in organizational context, 109–110
Missing tasks in iteration, 85
Modern development life cycle, 193–194
Multidimensional aspects of software development, 4
MunichRe company, xxxv

N
Next state determination in planning iterations, 73, 76–77
Ng, Pan-Wei, contributions by, 271
Noncritical requirement items in large development, 211
Notation, 261–262

O
Objectives column on iteration task boards, 80–84
Objectives in iteration, 62, 84
Obstacles in software development, 4–5
Operate the system activity space, 34
Operational state in deployment, 163
Opportunity, xxxii
  addressing, 9–10
  alpha definition cards for, 38–39
  alphas, 15–16, 20, 25–26
  in business case, 115–117, 125, 128
  in deployment, 164
  in developing systems, 137, 152
  issues, 6
  practices, 182–183
  in system support, 169
Organizational context, 109–110
Overlap of practices, 186

P
Papers, kernel for, 250
Performing state in developing systems, 148, 155
Placeholders, activity spaces as, 32
Plan-Do-Check-Adapt cycle
  in large development, 208–210
  in method building, 195
  overview, 61–67
Plan phase in Plan-Do-Check-Adapt cycle
  description, 63
  in large development, 208
Planning in business case, 121–125, 129
Planning iterations, 69–70
  alpha states for, 70–72
  current state determination, 73–75
  explicit requirement items in, 95–97
  kernel help for, 78
  next state determination, 73, 76–77
Poker approach for planning iterations, 71
Possibilities
  addressing, 9
  exploring, 33
Post-development phase in reaching out, 193–194
Practical feature of kernel, xxxiv–xxxv, 231
Practical tools, 242–243
Practice market place, vision for, 250
Practices, xxxiii–xxxiv, 43–44
in acceptance testing, 184–185
composition, 181, 186–188
defined, 179
explicit, 44–47
learning, 48–49
methods from, 47–48
precise, 180–181, 188–189, 242
in reaching out, 192
in requirements elicitation,
181–183
separating kernel from,
236–237
terminology and notation, 262
in zooming in, 176
Pre-development phase in reaching out, 193–194
Prebuilt methods, 197–198
Precise practices
making, 180–181
as practical tools, 242
value, 188–189
Prepare to do the work activity space, 34
Prepared state in business case, 120
Principles Established state, 120
Prioritization in iteration, 84
Process engineers, 231
Process in way of working, 90–91
Process professionals, impact on, 255
Product
description, 180–181
separating alphas from, 237–238
terminology and notation, 262
in way of working, 90–91
Product requirements in large development example, 203
Professors, kernel impact on, 255–256
Program managers, kernel impact on, 255
Progress, kernel focus on, 53
Q
Quality in large development, 207
R
Reaching out, 191–192
in development life cycle, 193–194
method building, 194–197
method control, 198, 200
methods in large organizations, 197–199
overview, 176–177
practices, 192
in scaling, 54
Readers, kernel benefits for, 55
Ready state
in developing systems, 153
in explicit requirement items, 96–97, 100
in planning iterations, 76
Recognized state in business case, 115
Refounding methods, 229–233
Represented state in business case, 116
Requirement item states
in iteration planning, 95–97
in method building, 196
task boards, 97–100
working with, 93–95
Requirement items
in business case, 127
in large development, 211–212
Requirements, xxxiii
in acceptance testing practice, 184–185
addressing, 9–10
in business case, 114, 118, 122, 125
current state determination, 74–75
in deployment, 163
in developing systems, 138–139, 144, 146–147, 153
issues, 7
in large development, 202–204
next state determination, 76–77
practices, 182–184
in system support, 169
in way of working, 89–90
Requirements alphas, xxxii, 15–17
alpha definition cards for, 38–39
alpha state cards for, 40–41
checklist, 29
in large development, 209–210
overview, 26, 28
states, 18–21
Requirements Coherent state
in acceptance testing practice, 185
in composed practices, 187
Requirements elicitation practice, 181–183
Research
kernel benefits, xxxix
vision for, 251
Retired state
in system support, 169–170
in team handover, 167, 169
Retrospectives
alpha states in, 90
benefits, 87–88
in developing systems, 142
in explicit requirement items, 101–102
S
Satisfied for Deployment state, 151
Satisfied in Use state
in deployment, 163
in system support, 169
Scaling up, 54, 201–202
challenges, 175–178
coordinating development teams through alphas, 210–212
large development example, 202–203
organizing work using alphas, 204–208
overview, 177–178
as practical tool, 242
teams, 212–213
visualizing development with alphas, 208–210
Schedules in business case, 125–128
Scope of alphas, 17, 31
Scrum practice in method building, 196
Seeded state in business case, 114, 119
SEMAT (Software Engineering Method and Theory), xxvii
Call for Action, xxvii-xxviii, 247
goals, xxix
kernel principles, 230–231
methods, 230, 232
OMG Submission, xxix–xxx
working documents, 267–268
Separation of concerns (SoC),
235–236
alphas from work products,
237–238
essence from details, 238–239
kernel from practices, 236–237
Shape the system activity space, 33
Simple language for practices, 180
Sjögren, Anders, xxxvi
Skills we always need to have, xxxi
Skinny system
in business case, 121–122,
126–127
in developing systems, 133–
135, 138–139
usable, 143–144
Skinny System Available milestone
in business case, 122, 126
in developing systems, 135
Social application requirements,
202–203, 209–210
Software engineering kernel, 23
Software professionals, kernel
impact on, 253–254
Software System, 137
in acceptance testing practice,
185
addressing, 10
in business case, 114, 118, 122,
125
current state determination,
74–75
in deployment, 163
in developing systems, 138,
144, 146, 153
in explicit requirement items,
96–97, 100
issues, 7
in iteration task boards, 83
in large development, 204
next state determination,
76–77
in system support, 169
Software System alphas, xxxii,
15–16
alpha definition cards for,
38–39
overview, 27–28
states, 21
Soley, Richard
grand vision, 247
SEMAT founding by, xxvii
Solution area of concern
in business case, 113–114
in deployment, 161–162
description, 24–25
in developing systems, 135–
136, 143–144, 151
Successfully Deployed mile-
stone, 159
in system support, 168
Solution needed state, 116
Specific skills in competencies, 35
Spence, Ian, contributions by,
272
Spikes, defined, 9
Sprint alpha in method building,
196
Stable kernels, 236–237
Stakeholders
addressing, 10
in business case, 113, 115–117,
122, 125, 128
in deployment, 163
Stakeholders (continued)
in developing systems, 133, 136–137, 144–146, 151
impact on, 253–254
issues, 6–7
practices, 182–183
in system support, 169
Stakeholders alphas, xxxii, 15–16
alpha definition cards for, 38–39
overview, 26, 28
states, 20
Started state
in developing systems, 140
in team handover, 165
State cards
for business case, 111, 122–123
for planning iterations, 71–72
working with, 38, 40–42
State progression, activities for, 184
States, xxxii, 27–28
acceptance testing practice, 184–185
business case, 126
checklists, 29–31
explicit requirement items, 94–102
overview, 18–21
planning iterations, 70–72
practices, 182–183
progression, activities for, 184
requirements, 18–21
scaling up using, 204–208
visualizing development with, 208–210
way of working, 88–89
Stop the work activity space, 34
Successfully Deployed milestone, 159, 161
Support, system, 167–170
Support the team activity space, 34
SWEBOK Curriculum Guidelines for Undergraduate Degree Programs in Software Engineering, 255
System support, 167–170
T
Target states in way of working, 88–89
Task boards
explicit requirement items, 97–100
working with, 80–84
Tasks in iteration
description, 62
prioritization, 84
Teaching
cornel impact on, 256
vision for, 250
Team
addressing, 10
in business case, 119, 125
competencies, visibility of, 5
complexity from, 4–5
in developing systems, 141, 148, 155
handover, 164–167
issues, 7
methods control, 198, 200
methods evolution, 224–225
methods ownership, 222–223
in reaching out practices, 192
in scaling up, 212–213
in system support, 170
Team alphas, xxxii, 15–16, 27–28
Team focus
  in large development, 204–208
  visibility of, 208
Team leaders, kernel impact on, 255
Terminology
  for iteration, 61–62
  table of, 261–262
Test alpha in method building, 196
Test the system activity space, 34
Tester competency, 36
Text books, vision for, 250
Theoretical basis as SEMAT goal, xxix
Thing to work with practice, 182–183
Things to do practice, 182
  in acceptance testing, 184–185
  composing, 186–187
  SEMAT OMG Submission, xxxix–xxxi
Things to work with practice
  in acceptance testing practice, 184–185
  composing, 186
  kernel, xxxii
  SEMAT OMG Submission, xxxix–xxxi
Thinking about methods, 218–219
To Do column in iteration task boards, 80–84
Tools
  practical, 242–243
  vision for, 250
Top-down hierarchies, 204
Track progress activity space, 34

U
Under Control state
  in developing systems, 142, 148–149
  in team handover, 165
Understand Stakeholder Needs
  activity space, 33
Understand the Requirements
  activity space
  in composed practices, 187
  description, 33
Universals, 265
Universities
  kernel adoption by, xxxvi
  kernel benefits, xxxix
  kernel impact on, 255–257
Usable state
  in developing systems, 137, 146
  in planning iterations, 76
Usable System Available milestone
  in business case, 122
  in developing systems, 143–144
Usable systems
  in business case, 126–127
  in developing systems, 133
  evolving, 146–148
Use the System activity space, 33
Users, method, 222

V
Value Added Services, 8
  addressing, 9
  alphas, 16–17
  states, 20
Value established state in business case, 116
Verified states for explicit requirement items, 94–96
Viable state in developing systems, 137, 145
Visibility
    of team competencies, 5
team focus for, 208
Vision Statement, 247, 249
Visualization in large development, 202, 208–210

W
Walk through the Usage of the System activity
    for composed practices, 187
description, 45
Walkthrough approach for planning iterations, 71
Waterfall development life cycle, 193–194
Way of Working
    adapting, 87–92
    alphas, xxxii, 16
        in business case, 114, 120, 125
        current state determination, 74–75
        in developing systems, 140–141, 155
        in explicit requirement items, 96, 100–102
        issues, 7
        iteration task boards, 81–82
        next state determination, 76
        overview, 27–28
        in system support, 170
        in team handover, 165–167
Work
    alphas, xxxii, 15, 27–28
        in business case, 114, 120, 125
        in developing systems, 140, 142, 148–149, 155
        issues, 7
        in system support, 170
        in team handover, 165–166
Work products
    description, 180–181
    separating alphas from, 237–238
    terminology and notation, 262
Working documents, 267–268
Working well state
    in developing systems, 155
    in explicit requirement items, 96, 100
    in planning iterations, 76
    in team handover, 166

Z
Zooming in
    for acceptance testing practice, 184–185
description, 179–180
overview, 176
in precise practices, 180–181
in requirements elicitation practice, 182–183
in scaling, 54