

Telecommunications giant stays ahead of risk with Plutora Release

Syncing struggles in a complex global environment

With over 40 000 employees spread across more than a dozen countries, this major global telecommunications company wrestled with an extremely complex environment. New applications and updates are released continuously at monthly and quarterly intervals.

A recent quarterly release included 77 major projects, 203 application changes and 331 different features. All of these applications and projects connect in a web of interdependencies which need to be managed – it is essential that a new release does not threaten the stability of previous projects.

The level of complexity only increased with each quarterly and monthly release. Data became trapped in silos, coherence between working teams was poor and glitches in production would trigger a chain reaction of issues through dependent applications.

Release management had one set of spreadsheets and Sharepoint lists to keep track of the scope, while the environments team would be working from another. External test organizations and the load performance team would have their own ideas of what was, or wasn't, included in the scope of a release.

The little automation that was available using Clarity still relied heavily on manual input and inserting reported data back into spreadsheets. Attempt after attempt was made to find workarounds and to build custom Sharepoint tools, but nothing was robust enough to keep all the lists in sync and to avoid the question: "What do you mean, this feature hasn't been tested?"

The risk of unquantified risk

The fundamental challenge facing the telecommunications company before Plutora was the inability to properly quantify risk. In a real-life recent case, FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) blocked a project release pushing through industry mandated changes due to looming natural disasters — the risk of networks going down at a crucial moment was simply too dangerous.

But due to the interlinked and interdependent nature of the telecommunication company's projects, isolating and stopping just one component will have unpredictable effects on the rest of the release. With no way to adequately quantify the risk of stopping a single project, the available options would be to either call off the whole release or to plough ahead, hoping one problematic application would not impact the whole.

Environments management faced similar problems. While the telecommunications company had four integrated test environments in rotation, tracking environments and their characteristics was a constant challenge. Lacking flexibility, one team's request to stay longer in an environment for testing could cause a costly ripple effect carrying forward to other teams.

"I could work from a gut feeling but I didn't have data. When risk did come up I couldn't talk about it until late in the release cycle — I couldn't answer the question to my leadership 'What is the risk of this release?'."

Driving visibility and accountability

At the time of writing, the telecommunications was approaching six months of live use of Plutora, with two large quarterly releases and several monthly releases carried out. Breaking down the walls between data silos with Plutora has massively improved visibility. All teams, both internal and external, work from the same script.

"We have a single version of truth in terms of what projects are in scope for the release."

Load and performance teams, release management and even external test organizations have a clear view of which projects are in scope and who is tracking which project. Issues and risks are far easier to track — as soon as an issue is raised in a meeting, a release team leader can instantly open a project, leave a comment and know that the release management team will see it.

It's easy now for the telecommunications company to stay on track throughout the lifecycle of a release and identify areas that are falling behind. Users can input their progress directly into the tool, while management are able to follow just by opening one of Plutora's dashboards or reports — no more chasing up through emails and phone calls.

"It's enabled us to drive accountability around release gates. We can use the tool to check off the testing boxes and hold people accountable on the lead up to each release, all the things that were very difficult for us to do over such an expansive group of people."

Shift left, reduced stress, increased confidence

Deployments by nature involve a certain level of stress. Before Plutora, the most stressful time of all was the Monday after a release. With Plutora, the timeline of stress has been shifted to the left, allowing more time to troubleshoot and solve issues.

"Our most stressful times now are around the go/no-go points one or two weeks before the release. But with our last couple of releases, the Monday after the release has been very quiet."

And the results speak for themselves: the volume of integrated releases (and thus, the increased functionality offered to clients) is up, while the number of outages, tickets being opened, and other negative incidents is down. Customer confidence is high, and release managers can keep executive confidence equally high using Plutora's ability to visually track release plans in real-time.

"Plutora has really helped us drive a better process, a more consistent process, more predictability — when we say software is ready to go to production it really is ready to go. Customers don't care about our process or the tools we use, but they notice results"