

# Forecross: Thoughts on Turning 35

## An Essay

**Highlights** – *Forecross mines internal data, discovers wealth for clients.*

- ✓ *dramatic price reductions*
- ✓ *Fixed-Price Guaranty*
- ✓ *additional no-cost services during vendor evaluation*
- ✓ *expanded focus on staff expertise*

Approaching our company's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary and riding a wave of nostalgia, a group of curious Forecross staff members launched what we now refer to as our "Big Dig." No, we were not attempting to build another tunnel under Boston Harbor.

Our goal was to determine the characteristics of a "perfect project." The challenge was to set aside our opinions and see if we could actually correlate project meta-data with success.

We followed an informal Knowledge Discovery process based on the CRISP standard for Data Mining and gathered all the inputs we had collected on more than 150 projects over the past three decades.

Because the acquisition of new business is heavily influenced by prior client references, our success as a company is inextricably tied to our clients' individual definitions of success. Modeling this was difficult and somewhat subjective, but our assumptions and data points were reasonable.

The remainder of this essay presents our findings and discusses how they are impacting our business going forward.

### Key Discoveries

1. **"Not Your Father's Oldsmobile"** – Forecross is one of the longest continually operating software companies in the industry. Our vision, mission and values remain constant.

But operationally, we are a completely different organization today, having shed our skin many times in order to evolve and adapt.

A few examples help paint the picture:

- Given the extensive suite of industrial strength migration software that underlies our offerings, ongoing maintenance and R&D are highly leveraged, with new development time and cost reduced accordingly.
- Due to our improving migration software we've gone from a high of 65 full-time employees in the late 1990s to a team of a dozen highly focused experts. This multi-year staff distillation has resulted in cost reductions and at the same time increased our capacity to conduct more projects simultaneously.

- Our headquarters are in San Francisco; however, nearly all our employees work remotely from places such as California’s Sierra foothills and the island of Oahu, collaborating extensively using a growing collection of web-based tools. Unencumbered by daily commutes, we are an inspired and highly productive team for whom the phrase “work-life balance” is a reality. The reduced San Francisco footprint is another cost saving.
- Forecross is not top-heavy. We don’t have senior executives who never get involved in the very projects that pay their salaries. We use a hands-on approach where senior management routinely works with developers and project teams to ensure project success.

2. **The Best Kept (Automation) Secret** – The quality of the results produced by automated transformation software should be a key factor in a client’s choice of vendors. Everybody knows this, right?

Not necessarily. The importance of the *quality of the code* produced by an automated tool is often underestimated or even ignored during vendor selection.

That a vendor *has* automation matters significantly because almost every RFP demands it; that the automation is *good* matters little until later in the project when the modernized application deliverables are being scrutinized by those charged with maintaining them for the next decade or more. Poor vendor selection can result in yet another unwanted “legacy” in the client’s apps.

Clients want automation because it ensures speed, accuracy, thoroughness, measurability, and more. It is a pre-requisite of engagement, not a guarantee of a successful project. The rubber doesn’t truly meet the road until the modernized application goes live, and must start providing value, flexibility and responsiveness to the organization.

The secret is that *automation* and *quality of code* are separate factors, that having one doesn’t imply the other, and that when the dust settles, code quality is far more closely correlated with client-defined success than is automation alone.

Forecross found that we needed to do significantly better in sharing this secret with our prospective clients early in their vendor selection process.

3. **Staffing: We ♥ Legacy Modernization** – Using client-specific success factors, we found a significant correlation between a successful project and the expertise of our team. Interestingly, team experience mattered considerably less.

In fact, studies conducted at the Expertise Lab at Michigan State University have shown that deliberate practice accounted for only 29.9% of the variance in expertise in music. (Hambrick, et al, 2014).

Huh? Put simply, it’s about passion.

Both vendors and clients often staff their legacy migration projects with people whose key qualification is that they've done it before. But let's face it – most IT professionals are not scrambling to list legacy modernization experience at the top of their resumes. They may participate in a project and deliver good performance. But outstanding performance? Not so much.

Unless they are really curious, unless they continually strive to learn, unless they are driven by a need to master legacy modernizations; they won't have the passion it takes to go from merely experienced to expert.

Are experts born that way or can they be grown?

Our data points to the latter. A key contributor to that growth is cross-training. At Forecross, our head of product development periodically serves as the project manager for a migration project, so that he sees the products in action and lives with the results along with the client. He always comes back with product enhancement ideas. Our project managers are often recruited to run our monthly internal regression tests using nothing more than our operational documentation, becoming members of the operations team.

Cross-training fosters clear communication, helps avoid problems, and ensures that commitments are knowledgeably made and met. It also fosters an environment where curious, confident people are eager to take off their coat of expertise in one area so that they can learn something new in another.

The bottom line is that it's not enough to be good at what you do, to have experience. You have to love what you do, you have to master it if you want to become experts like the Forecross team. You have to ❤️ legacy modernization!

## Conclusions and Steps Taken

We found that 35 years of evolution has had a dramatic impact on the character and nature of Forecross operations as a 21<sup>st</sup> century IT organization. Two factors were closely correlated with our most successful legacy modernization projects:

- the quality and depth of our automation, and
- the longevity and cohesiveness of our team of legacy modernization experts

Related to the Key Discoveries described above – Pricing, Automation and Staffing – Forecross has implemented the following changes to our business practices:

1. **Pricing** – All the data pointed to the fact that, much like the cobbler's children (going barefoot), our pricing model was in need of a legacy modernization!

So we challenged everything in the model - from the static foundation assumptions to the project-specific "moving parts." Ongoing maintenance and R&D costs, recouping initial software investment, percentage of corporate overhead each project must bear, unit pricing, volume discount matrix, known technical and business risks and about 10 other factors all went under the microscope.

Forecross now offers our clients:

- Reduced pricing for their legacy modernizations. Our new pricing model allows us to deliver prices that are 25-30% lower, while still providing the same excellent quality, dedication, corporate-wide commitment and the full range of customizations offered by our software.
- Unique among legacy modernization vendors, a Fixed Price Guaranty that eliminates price creep and the squirmy discussions about what is in-scope or out-of-scope after the project gets under way.

2. **Automation** – To demonstrate the superior quality of our technology and the lasting benefits it delivers to our clients:

- Forecross will automatically convert any database schema definition supported by our product line to SQL as part of an up-front vendor evaluation. We will do this overnight, with no cost or obligation.

This will help focus attention on the quality of our automation, not merely the existence of it.

3. **Staffing** – With a renewed focus on the value of finding and fostering expertise over experience:

- Forecross will continue to cross-train our team members
- We will investigate and implement new ways to create an environment that encourages and rewards passion and expertise in what we do

One thing is certain – we've come a long way in 35 years and we can't wait for the evolutions yet to come!



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