

FIELD NOTES FOR THE CEO · DEPLOYMENT STRATEGY

The Smith and the Tailor

Why many deployments are cut before anyone measures the floor, what the habit costs once the deployer leaves, and two rules you can set before kickoff

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Marcos Stipicich
Deployment Strategist · 13 years in supply chain and operations

Cover: A smith at the anvil, Rabanus Maurus, De universo, Monte Cassino, 1022-1035

The argument in one page

Many deployments are cut before anyone measures the floor, by someone who will not be there when the seams give.

Call that person the smith. The smith arrives with a tool, frames every problem in its terms and leaves with a sign-off. The tailor does the opposite: measures before cutting, lets the machine sew the long seams, fits by hand and comes back for the second fitting. They are not two kinds of people. The same strategist can be a smith on Monday and a tailor on Thursday.

1. **The habit is old and human.** Whoever masters a tool sees problems shaped like it. In a chess lab, even experts kept looking at the answer they already had.
2. **In a company it has a name: the magic bullet.** Nobody is assigned to make the change happen, and the technology is expected to do it alone. My reading: the go-live is recorded as a success, and the nail bends in month three.
3. **Two rules change who carries it.** Name an owner of the change on your side, who is not the deployer. And check, after 90 days, whether the floor ever beat the system.

> "…if the only tool you have is a hammer…"
> *Abraham Maslow, The Psychology of Science, 1966*

Gone before the nail bends

What the smith says. "Once it's live, the system will drive the change." **Where you find one.** In the kickoff deck and the slide where the project ends the week the floor begins. The implementation partner, the project team, the deployment strategist who skips the measuring: anyone who arrives with a tool and leaves with a sign-off.

In a 1997 management-journal article, Lynne Markus and Robert Benjamin named a belief they found in IT-enabled change: the magic bullet theory. Nobody is assigned to make the change happen, and everyone assumes the technology will do it by itself.

The materials are rigid: code, a form, a standard configuration, all forged before anyone measured the floor. Following one enterprise-system rollout for three years, Diane Strong and Olga Volkoff sorted the misfits between system and company into six domains, data among them, and two kinds: what the system lacks and what it imposes. The floor wears the second kind like armor made for someone else: it walks, but stiffly.

My reading: the smith drives the nail and the project closes. If the nail bends, it bends after the party, on the floor, in an account with nobody's name on it.

In the smith’s defense

A smith without a hammer is a tourist, and the habit is not vanity. Abraham Kaplan called it the law of the instrument in 1964, picturing a small boy with a hammer; two years later Abraham Maslow added the nail.

It holds even for experts. In a laboratory study by Merim Bilalić, Peter McLeod and Fernand Gobet, chess players who had found one solution said they were looking for a better one, while their eyes kept going back to the one they had.

So the cure is not a better attitude. A deployer who promises to keep an open mind still sees the floor through the tool, because that is what knowing a tool means.

A confession. I carry three hammers myself: floor experience, the incentive model and the guardrail. That is why the rules on the next pages do not depend on the deployer’s character, mine included.

BY CONTRAST

The Tailor

“Measure twice, cut once.”
A carpenters’ proverb, borrowed for cloth

The shears are in one hand and the cloth is under the other. He has not cut yet.

Giovanni Battista Moroni, The Tailor (‘Il Tagliapanni’), 1565–1570, detail. National Gallery, London.

What the tailor does

Measures before cutting. Before anything is configured, the tailor counts what is on the floor and watches the work that the system will touch: the shelf, the dock, the exception that someone resolves by hand every night.

Leaves the long seams to the machine. Moroni's tailor had none; mine does. In a deployment the machine is the AI agent: it carries the repetitive load.

Fits by hand. The fitting stays with the people who know the floor. They decide whether the cut works, not the deck.

Comes back for the second fitting. The first fitting happens before go-live. The second happens weeks later, when the work has moved and the seams show where they pull.

The tailor's own risk is sewing whatever the client orders. Ask the smith for a pocket and the answer is that the standard has none. Ben Light noted that most companies bend instead, reshaping their processes to fit the package and keep the vendor's support. The tailor first asks what the pocket will cost to carry: in Light's two cases, customizations could pay off, but each needs weighing against what it adds to future maintenance. Measuring is not the same as agreeing. A tailor who never says "this will not fit" is a smith with better manners.

My reading, not a finding: nobody has compared deployments led this way with deployments cut from a template.

Smith or tailor: what to ask

WHAT YOU SEE	WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT TO ASK
The plan ends the week the floor begins	The smith. Ask: who owns adoption on the floor in month three, by name?
The configuration was fixed before anyone walked the floor	The smith. Ask: what did you measure before you cut?
Every fix is the next module, or "that can't be done"	The law of the instrument. Ask: what would you do if you could not use your tool?
The agent drafts and the floor checks the fit	The tailor. Ask: who calls the second fitting, and what did you talk us out of?
The deployer offers to own the change	Neither. Adoption needs an owner who answers to you, not to the vendor

Two rules a CEO can set before kickoff.

1. **Name the owner of the change in writing.** An executive on your side, named before kickoff, who owns adoption on the floor after the deployer leaves.
2. **Run the 90-day check.** Before kickoff, pick a task where the floor knows something the system does not, and the metric that decides, such as stockouts. Each month, log twenty of the system's recommendations: what the operator would have done and what doing nothing would cost. If neither ever wins in 90 days, audit the deployer before the system. The sign nobody asks the floor: almost no overrides and instant acceptance.

What this does not prove

- **The magic bullet comes from a practitioner journal.** Markus and Benjamin described a belief they found; they did not measure how often it sinks a project.
- **The misfits and the customizations come from few cases.** Strong and Volkoff followed one company for three years; Light's advice on weighing each customization comes from two ERP projects. The six domains are theirs; the smith, the armor and the pocket are mine.
- **The experts were playing chess.** The study shows how a known answer holds the eye; it does not test deployers.
- **The tailor is my figure, and so are the two rules.** The 90-day check is a rule of thumb from my manuscript, and the twenty a month are mine; neither is a tested threshold. The tailor would fail if a deployment that measured and fitted left the same side spreadsheets and the same hours of reconciliation as one cut from a template.

One question before your next deployment. Ask the person who will lead it: what will you measure before you cut, and who on our side will own the fit after you leave?

About the author

Marcos Stipicich
Deployment Strategist · Supply Chain & Operations

I grew up on a sheep ranch in Patagonia, where my father's rule was simple: reading is worth nothing if you can't see it on a working day. I still work by it: I measure before I cut, and no tool or method beats what works on the floor.

Thirteen years in Chile, Argentina and Australia taught me that supply chain is not just logistics: it is the whole pipeline, which is why it ends up putting out fires that start elsewhere. A promotion planned in marketing becomes expedited orders in purchasing and a blocked aisle in the warehouse. I would rather find where the leak starts. On one gemba walk, mixed, short and damaged orders led back to a per-operator productivity KPI tied to a bonus; I retired the metric and measured customer satisfaction instead.

I have worked most of that pipeline: planning for more than 200 stores, a three-site logistics operation, a USD 30M cross-border e-commerce P&L and a 50,000-SKU warehouse-system cutover, where I stayed on the floor until the shortcuts died and order processing time fell 20%. Deployments live or die inside that pipeline, and that is where I work. I learned to code in C; today I build with AI coding agents, keeping the math and the rollback in my hands.

Available for pre-cutover forensic audits, deployment strategy, and Forward Deployed roles.

From my manuscript, *The Deployment Chasm*.

linkedin.com/in/marcos-stipicich · marcos.stipicic@gmail.com

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