The Business Case Is a Certificate, Not a Permission

Auditing return on investment as a fitness claim

By Mario Aiello

A business case is the most confident document an organization will ever produce about something that has not happened yet.

It states a return, usually as a single figure, and that figure carries the project through approval. After that it sits in a folder. Everyone remembers it was positive, which is all the memory is asked to do.

What the number answers

On fit for what, the business case is the strongest of the indicators in this series. It does name a purpose and a payoff, which is more than most numbers do. But it is written by the people who want the project approved, and the assumptions that produce the return are the ones most likely to be generous. The case answers the question, and the person answering it has a stake in the answer.

On fit for context, it is partial. It describes the organization as it stood when the case was written. The market, the dependencies, and the people who were supposed to change their behaviour are all assumed to hold still.

On fit for how, it tends to presume. The return assumes the work will be delivered and adopted as planned. Delivery is then tracked against budget and milestones, which measure whether the plan is being followed, not whether the return is still likely.

On fit until when, it says nothing. There is no date after which the case must be shown to still hold.

So the business case answers purpose at one moment, and presumes the other three.

Why it behaves like a certificate

The Expiry Clause argues that validation is a permission, not a certificate. A permission depends on conditions staying true, and when they change it has to be re-earned. A certificate says something was true on the day it was issued and stays valid regardless.

The business case is issued as a permission and used as a certificate. Approval is read as proof that the project is fit, and months later, with the world changed, the same approval is still being cited as the reason to continue. Spend goes on because the case once said it should, and the case is rarely reopened because reopening it means someone has to say the number was wrong.

That is Fitness-Washing at project scale. The language of validation is present, a signed figure on file, and the validation itself ended at approval.

Where this stops

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Many organizations do review benefits at gates, and a good gate is exactly what turns the certificate back into a permission. I am describing the case where the review never happens or only checks spend. This is desk work, and I have not audited a portfolio of real cases.

The fix is small. Treat the return as a claim with conditions attached, name them, and check them at each gate: do the assumptions that produced this figure still hold? If they do not, the figure is not a forecast any more. It is a memory.

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