A Decision Support Scheme for Software Process Improvement Prioritization

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Abstract. Software managers pursuing process improvement initiatives are confronted with the problem of selecting potential improvements. In the field of software quality assurance, suitable decision support for prioritizing the optimization of activities according to their return on investment is not yet available. Our paper addresses this research gap. We develop a decision support scheme that facilitates the selection and prioritization of quality assurance activities. We demonstrate the scheme's applicability in three industrial case studies. By relying on the well-known COQUALMO model's characteristics and calibration data, our approach is industrially applicable with little data collection efforts.

Keywords: Software Process Improvement, Decision Support, COQUALMO

1 Introduction

For decades, users of software solutions have been suffering from poor solution quality [24]. Estimates for the United States show annual economic damages of billions of dollars [17]. Recently, software vendors have attempted to tackle this challenge by adapting the concepts of more mature industries, such as manufacturing [1]. This trend can also be seen in quality assurance (QA) departments.

Software defects are typically traced by means of different QA techniques. When attempting to improve the QA process, management is often confronted with the decision which technique to improve first in order to achieve the highest possible quality gains. Software Process Improvement (SPI) [2, 11] promises to support quality managers in their decision-making. It is a software-industry-specific concept, defined as "changes implemented to a software process that bring about improvements" [18]. However, a light-weight, context-specific, and easy-to-apply SPI scheme has not yet been proposed. We fill this research gap by developing an SPI decision support scheme. It provides quality managers with a toolkit to prioritize improvement activities based on expected defect reduction.

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Thereby, our approach relies on the Constructive Quality Model (COQUALMO) [6, 7]. While COQUALMO's objective is defect prediction, our approach attempts to prioritize process improvements. We start with the same process assessment case study as COQUALMO, but we focus on the defect removal part and neglect defect introduction. Our optimization approach re-uses calibration data elicited from industry experts as provided in COQUALMO [5]. It also adapts to COQUALMO's definition of the defect removal model in order to determine the effect of the calibration constants on residual defects. Since it relies on many pre-calculated values, the approach can be applied in a highly efficient way.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Related work on SPI and COQUALMO is introduced in Section 2. Section 3 presents our findings in form of the proposed optimization approach. The applicability of this approach is demonstrated in three industrial case studies in Section 4. Our findings are summarized in Section 5, where we also give an outlook on future research directions.

2 Related Work

2.1 Software Process Improvement

Optimizing the processes of a company is one of the core responsibilities of its management. In business administration, various frameworks for business process improvements have been developed. Deming [9] with his Shewart cycle and Womack/Jones [25] with their Lean Thinking approach are two prominent examples. Besides targeting process improvement in general, these two frameworks have a special focus on quality.

In the software industry, SPI has been developed as an industry-specific concept [2,11]. It addresses the peculiarities of software engineering and is applicable to various kinds of software projects as commercial-of-the-shelf or in-house and custom software development.

A central part of SPI and other process improvement concepts is measurement [8, 12,15,19–21]. Statistical process control is necessary for both transparency of the status quo and controlling the success of improvements quantitatively. Several standardized process assessment methodologies have been developed for software engineering which are usually referred to as 'Software Process Capability' or 'Maturity Models' [23].

Research on SPI often deals with change management practices and influence factors of SPI success (e.g. [10, 22]). We therefore address an open research question by proposing a light-weight decision support scheme for the prioritization of quality assurance techniques according to how much they are expected to benefit from process improvement.

2.2 COQUALMO

COQUALMO is a quality model aiming at the prediction of residual defects in software development projects [6,7]. It is an extension of the project effort estimation model COCOMO II [3] which has successfully been implemented in various industrial settings.

The basic idea behind COQUALMO is to picture software artifacts as reservoirs (tanks) connected by pipes, similar to a water supply system. Defects are introduced and removed by additional pipes representing processes that may introduce or remove defects from the system—see Jones' tank and pipe model [14] and Boehm's defect introduction and removal model [4].

COQUALMO models the introduction and the removal of defects by two separate sub-models. The defect introduction (DI) sub-model covers the introduction of new (non-trivial) defects into the software code. It uses a subset of the cost drivers from COCOMO II [3] to derive a set of 21 parameters of defect introduction. These parameters are multiplied with the size of the software artifact. The output of the DI model is the predicted number of requirements, design, and coding defects.

The defect removal (DR) sub-model covers the identification and elimination of defects in later phases of the software project. Both sub-models must be applied in order to predict the number of residual defects after test. Since the sub-models are separate, it is possible to instantiate one without the other. We make use of this model characteristic, because in the context of our selection approach we are only interested in defect removal. In the following, we will therefore merely discuss the DR sub-model in more detail.

The defect removal sub-model relies on a multiplicative and influence factor based modeling approach. Residual defects are modeled separately for each software artifact type. Like the DI sub-model, the DR sub-model classifies defects according to the process steps in which they were created as requirements, design, and coding defects. This classification is named 'artifact type' in COQUALMO, and it may easily be extended. The DR sub-model considers three different defect removal techniques, which are called 'profiles' in COQUALMO:

- 'Automated Analysis' is a technique that statically checks the source code of a piece of software.
- 'Peer Reviews' are code inspections performed by people—hence the term 'people reviews' in [6].
- 'Execution Testing and Tools' can be seen as dynamic testing of the software product, potentially by means of dedicated testing tools.

All these techniques can help detect defects from all artifact types, although the defect may have been introduced in a much earlier phase. In COQUALMO, the number of residual defects of artifact type j is estimated as

$$DRes_{Est_j} = C_j \cdot DI_{Est_j} \cdot \prod_{i=1}^{3} (1 - DRF_{ij})$$

with

j	artifact type (requirements, design, or coding), $j \in \{1,2,3\}$;
DI_{Est_j}	number of defects of artifact type j, estimated based on the DI sub-model;
C_j	baseline (calibration factor) calculated from historical data;
i	defect finding and removal techniques (automated analysis, peer reviews, and execution testing and tools), $i \in \{1,2,3\}$;
DRF_{ij}	defect removal factor modeling the impact of the i-th technique on the j-th artifact.

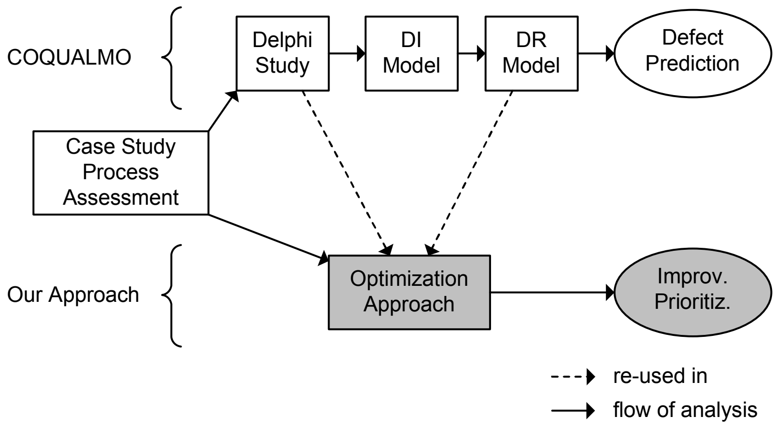

Fig. 1. Association between COQUALMO and our approach.

For each defect removal technique, six maturity levels ranging from 'very low' over 'low', 'nominal', 'high', and 'very high' to 'extra high' are defined based on typical process characteristics. For each combination of artifact type j and profile i as well as each maturity level, [6] reports a value of DRF_{ij} determined by experts in a two-step Delphi study.

3 Proposed Decision Support Scheme

3.1 Differentiation from COQUALMO

The optimization approach suggested in this paper is directly derived from COQUALMO's defect removal sub-model. Our selection approach does not rely on COQUALMO's defect introduction sub-model. Instead, it is based on the weighting of influence factors by experts in form of the aforementioned two-step Delphi study. Besides the general characteristics of the multiplicative model for defect removal, this data set is the most important part of COQUALMO used in this study. Figure 1 illustrates how COQUALMO and our approach are linked.

In [5], the defect removal factors are provided in table format. They are reflected in the model definition in form of the DRF_{ij} factors. DRF_{ij} can be interpreted as the fraction of defects of artifact type j that can be removed by means of defect removal technique i. (Note that in this study COQUALMO's concept of defect removal profiles is referred to as defect removal techniques.) For example, a DRF_{ij} value of 0.1 means that 10% of the defects of artifact type j can be removed via technique i.

Due to the typical constraint in an industrial case study that its findings must justify the data acquisition effort, usually only one artifact type j is taken into account. In most cases this is coding, for obvious reasons. Thus, DRF_{ij} can be reduced to DRF_i since there is no further need to distinguish between artifact types. However, this simplification of the model is not necessary, and the selection approach as derived below can easily be developed for multiple artifact types as well.

	Very Low	Low	Nominal	High	Very High
Automated Analysis	10%	11%	13%	25.7%	13%
Peer Review	30%	25.7%	23.1%	33%	37%
Execution Testing & Tools	38%	32%	26.2%	29%	45%

Table 1. Optimization Matrix.

Since DRF_i (and DRF_{ij}, respectively) are model variables that are assigned values corresponding to the maturity level m found when instantiating COQUALMO, we additionally introduce the constants $DRC_{i,m}$ where i is the defect removal technique and m is its maturity level. The values of $DRC_{i,m}$ can directly be taken from [6].

3.2 Definition

A qualitative pre-study revealed that quality managers are very interested in prioritizing improvements of the three techniques of automatic code analysis, peer reviews, and execution testing and tools. Thus, our approach extends COQUALMO in a way that provides quality management with the means to prioritize its investments into process maturity. Since the software industry is currently striving for a higher maturity of its processes [16], managers would like to know where to start in order to achieve the biggest gains. In the field of quality management, these gains can be quantified in terms of the reduction in the number of defects. In other words: If a quality manager has to choose between process improvements in the three techniques mentioned above, s/he should pick the one that is expected to yield the highest reduction in defects remaining in the software.

In fact, the constants provided in COQUALMO already contain all the information necessary for revealing the impact of moving a process to the next maturity level. Let

$$\Delta_{i,m} = DRes_{Est(i,m)} - DRes_{Est(i,m+1)}$$

be the estimated number of residual defects remaining less in an artifact when the maturity of defect removal technique i is upgraded from level m to level $m+1$. $i \in \{1,2,3\}$ is one of the three defect removal techniques, and $m \in \{1,...,5\}$ represents one of the maturity levels except ‘extra high’, which is excluded due to the impossibility of any further improvement at this level.

Based on these concepts, we can derive

$$\mathrm{opt}_{i,m} = \Delta_{i,m}/DRes_{Est(i,m)},$$

which is the estimated fraction by which the number of residual defects is reduced when upgrading the process from (i,m) to $(i,m+1)$. This expression can be simplified to

$$\mathrm{opt}_{i,m} = 1 - \frac{(1-DRC_{i,m+1})}{(1-DRC_{i,m})},$$

where $DRC_{i,m}$ denotes the constant defect reduction factor for defect removal technique i on maturity level m for the artifact type 'coding' as given in [6]. $\text{opt}_{i,m}$ is the optimization index for moving the process for defect removal technique i from maturity level m to $m+1$. As shown above, it represents the estimated fraction by which the total number of remaining defects would be reduced when a specific process is moved to the next maturity level. The optimization index for the highest maturity level is undefined since, by definition, at this level further improvement is impossible.

Despite restricting our industrial case studies to the artifact type 'coding', the above formula can easily be extended to support COQUALMO's other two artifact types as well. The only necessary modification is the insertion of a third index j, denoting the artifact type, to all variables.

Calculating the optimization index for all pairs (i,m) yields an optimization matrix for process maturity improvement. The optimization matrix shown in Table 1 relies exclusively on the data provided by Chulani in COQUALMO [6]. Therefore, it can be calculated without any case-study-specific data. It's entries give the percentage by which the number of residual defects in coding will be reduced when raising the process maturity by one level for the given defect removal technique.

Our selection approach will typically be instantiated by a process assessment in order to derive the current maturity levels of the three techniques. For each technique i and its current maturity level m, the value $\text{opt}_{i,m}$ is then looked up in the optimization matrix provided in Table 1. An improvement of the technique with the highest value is expected to yield the highest possible reduction of remaining defects and, consequently, the best impact on quality according to the COQUALMO model.

Note that we assume single steps of process improvement. This is due to our experience that it is very difficult to implement process improvements, and just as difficult not to fall back to the old practices over time. Our assumption is in line with the recent debate of the establishment of lean thinking and lean engineering principles in the software industry [16, 25]. Recommeding jumps across multiple levels, for example from 'very low' to 'high', in one step would rather stem from the opposite school of thought, namely business process re-engineering [13].

4 Case Studies

In order to demonstrate the applicability and usefulness of our approach in practice, we conducted three case studies. One of them was concerned with the software development unit at a medium-sized enterprise. The quality assurance processes of the chosen project were well established, but the project itself was rather small with a team of less than 20 developers. The other two industrial case studies were conducted at a large European business software vendor. Here, two different development projects were chosen in an innovative line of business. The team sizes were about 60 and 80 developers, respectively. We consistently number these case studies by 1 to 3, but due to confidentiality reasons we cannot provide any information on which number belongs to which development project.

Our research methodology is interview-based. For each case study, we interviewed five project members. Interviewees where chosen to cover a broad range of roles within

Case Study 1	Very Low	Low	Nominal	High	Very High
Automated Analysis	10%	11%	13%	**25.7%** → 3.	13%
Peer Review	30%	25.7%	23.1%	33%	**37%** → 2.
Execution Testing & Tools	38%	32%	26.2%	29%	**45%** → 1.

Case Study 2	Very Low	Low	Nominal	High	Very High
Automated Analysis	10%	**11%** → 3.	13%	25.7%	13%
Peer Review	30%	25.7%	**23.1%** → 2.	33%	37%
Execution Testing & Tools	38%	32%	26.2%	29%	**45%** → 1.

Case Study 3	Very Low	Low	Nominal	High	Very High
Automated Analysis	10%	11%	13%	25.7%	**13%** → 3.
Peer Review	30%	25.7%	23.1%	33%	**37%** → 2.
Execution Testing & Tools	38%	32%	26.2%	29%	**45%** → 1.

Table 2. Optimization Matrices for the Three Case Studies.

a project. For each case study, we interviewed the quality manager responsible for the project and covered in addition at least four of the following job roles: developer, architect, tester, quality specialist, and project lead.

The interview was based on a questionnaire derived from the defect profile descriptions in [5]. Our experience with two pre-studies conducted at projects 1 and 2 showed that purely questionnaire-based research yields noisy data in the form of a high variation in the process maturity estimates. This is due to difficulties on the part of the interviewees to rank their processes in an industry-wide context. We therefore asked open questions regarding the processes to come up with a first restricted set of possible maturity levels. In a next step, we provided our interview participants with examples tailored to their context in order to achieve a common understanding of the maturity levels. This methodology appeared to be a critical success factor in low-effort process maturity assessments, since our default explanations of the different maturity levels where often only understood after providing context-specific details and examples.

An alternative data acquisition method would have been a CMMI appraisal. However, its effort is very high compared to our approach and would not have been justifiable in our setup. Nevertheless, CMMI has gained popularity, and it is recommended to check for existing appraisals prior to conducting new interviews. Since it provides valuable input for other business decisions, a new appraisal might also be worth the effort when combining our approach with others.

Participants of our case study praised our efficient data acquisition methodology and voluntarily asked us to repeat this assessment every six months for benchmarking and controlling purposes. However, a low-effort questionnaire-based process assessment methodology may introduce a bias into the data acquisition. We encourage considerate evaluation of the data quality needs of a usage scenario prior to conducting a survey.

According to the selection scheme discussed in Section 3, we highlight the maturity levels of the defect removal techniques in our optimization matrices in Table 2. The improvement rank of the test activities is given to the right of the arrows. For example, in case study 1, it would be best to invest into an improvement of execution testing and tools. Raising the process maturity level from very high to extra high is expected to yield a reduction of residual defects by 45%. Second-best is the improvement of peer reviews with an improvement factor of 37%. The improvement of the automated analysis technique from high to very high process maturity ranks third with an estimated improvement of 25.7%.

After conducting our three case studies, we asked the participating quality managers whether or not they agree with the prioritization derived by our approach. This cross-check was successful, and most managers accepted the finding that test execution environments are an attractive area for attaining high returns on investment in improvement initiatives.

5 Conclusions

In this paper, we presented a decision support approach to prioritize three different quality assurance techniques for selection in improvement projects. It is based on the multiplicative model definition of COQUALMO, as well as its calibration data gathered in the course of a two-step Delphi study [5]. Our approach facilitates the current advancement of the software industry in the form of managed, lean processes. Quality managers are able to prioritize process improvements based on their expected effect on quality in terms of residual defects. The approach can be instantiated with low effort due to the re-use of COQUALMO constants. It is also context-specific due to relying on process assessments. Our approach's applicability has successfully been demonstrated in three industrial case studies with a medium-sized enterprise and a global player in the software industry.

Future research is needed in order to also quantify the investment needed to raise process maturity levels. Once these data are available, quality managers are able to economically trade off between the expected quality enhancement yield of an improvement initiative on the one hand and its costs on the other hand. Additionally, our approach should be validated by conducting repetitive case studies after processes have been improved and lifted to higher maturity levels. In this way, the assumptions concerning defect reductions inherent in the Delphi-study calibration data of COQUALMO can be cross-checked and possibly refined.

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