

Successful Solutions Through Agile Project Management

Agile project management is a highly iterative process in which constant communication between the customer (end user) and the project team is inherent to its success.

While traditional project management is task-driven and assumes that circumstances affecting the project are predictable, Agile project management operates in a more fluid, adaptive environment.

The users and stakeholders are partnered in a collaborative effort focused on the project vision and the end result, and Agile project managers must migrate from management to leadership, from monitoring compliance to enabling self-direction and from acting as a foreman to becoming a facilitator of creativity and innovation.

In contrast with traditional project methods, Agile emphasizes the incremental delivery of working products or prototypes for client evaluation and optimization. While predictive project management methods assume that the entire set of requirements and activities can be forecast at the beginning of the project, Agile combines all the elements of product development (such as requirements, analysis, design, development and testing) in brief, regular iterations.

Each iteration delivers a working product or prototype, and the response to that product or prototype serves as crucial input into the succeeding iterations. Agile theory assumes that changes, improvements and additional features will be incorporated throughout the product development life cycle — and that change is an opportunity to improve the product and make it more fit for use, rather than a failing of the process.

Delivering customer value is the key aspect of Agile — conducted through the collaboration of a small team, usually consisting of the customer/end user, a project manager, a business analyst (or the role of business analysis)

Delivering customer value is the key aspect of Agile project management. The focus is on driving user and stakeholder collaboration to operate a singular project vision.



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and specialist(s). These could include system developers, subject matter experts, IT architect and/or the sole person with specific knowledge who understands how all the project pieces fit together.

The Agile movement began in the software development and IT project space in the 1950s, and has since evolved to be used successfully in a broad range of projects that are compatible with the following principles, as outlined in the Agile Manifesto¹: “We are uncovering better ways of developing products by doing it and helping others to do it. Through this work we have come to value individuals and interactions over processes and tools, working products over comprehensive documentation, customer collaboration over contract negotiation and responding to change over following a plan.”

Implementing Agile

The main challenge facing organizations as they transition from a traditional delivery approach to Agile involves reconfiguring the human, managerial and technological components.

Agile requires substantive change to the way functions (such as gathering user requirements, deriving a project schedule, engineering the product, managing the team and measuring progress) are performed.

The organization’s culture, structure and methodologies will determine the amount of effort required to transition to Agile, and challenges such as resistance and objection among different levels are likely.

There are key issues with Agile that must be addressed at the following three levels.

1. Management level:

Predictability

Agile focuses on the delivery of value to the customer, rather than strict compliance to a rigorous set of procedures, and values inventiveness and innovation over predictability and unchanging processes.

Extensive Time Commitment

Managers must be prepared to accept and sponsor the intensive level of collaboration and involvement that Agile requires.



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Resources Management

Managers must be ready to trust their project teams to be self-directed, and to tolerate more resource risk.

Risk Management

Managers must prepare to accept the reality of project uncertainty, risk and cost, and abstain from arbitrary schedules and budgets.

Metrics and Measurements

Success is measured by the outputs delivered by the project teams. Credit will be given for the products, features and functions delivered and not the tasks completed by the project teams

The key issues with successful Agile implementation must be addressed at the management, team and stakeholder levels.

2. Team level

Personal attributes

Since Agile teams are expected to be small, self-governing and self-regulated, there is a high expectation in regard to the personal attributes of team members. They should enjoy the special challenges of working in an Agile environment, be prepared to forego personal recognition in favor of team accomplishment and enjoy working in a highly transparent environment in which their work products, creativity and diligence are visible to their teammates and customers.

3. Stakeholder/Customer level

Traditional signposts

They will lose the traditional signposts of progress on which they have come to rely, and estimates of time and cost will not be available to help them allocate budget and staff. They also convey unique concerns, such as the Agile requirement for intense collaboration and constant availability, and its effect on their own workload.

It is therefore essential for executives, business managers and project managers to understand:

- How much effort and investment in time and resources will be required to develop new tools, templates and processes.
- Which existing processes, tools and templates for executing projects can be applied to Agile.



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- How jettisoning certain processes and structure will impact the business.
- How the metrics and measurement techniques to determine project success (or failure) need to change.
- How reporting methods will be different for Agile versus traditional projects.
- How stakeholders and customers will react to the change.
- How the existing culture and organizational structure will be impacted by Agile.

Overcoming the challenges

To overcome these challenges, it is important to understand that Agile is best suited to innovative, exploratory/experimental projects such as new software systems rather than the repetitive, production-style projects that require intricate processes or detailed documentation.

From a logistical point of view, the ability to form and manage teams across multiple geographies and time zones through the use of video, collaboration tools or other virtual techniques should be considered as critical to the success of Agile projects.

And assessing organizational readiness will also help an organization identify and evaluate the various organizational forces in place that may help or hinder its transition to Agile project management.

For example, executives and senior managers need to determine:

- The degree to which the organization values innovation and creativity over stability.
- The degree to which the organization can make independent, product-related decisions.
- The organization's willingness to accept and work with uncertainty.
- The organization's ability to allocate resources full time to one project rather than multiple projects.
- The organization's ability to understand and embrace multiple approaches to documenting and measuring project progress.
- The degree to which the organization is able to partner with its customers.

Likewise, assessing project manager readiness will help determine whether they are ready to execute Agile projects, therefore executives, business managers, and all project managers need to determine:



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- The degree to which the project manager focuses on the customer rather than on following standard project management procedures.
- The degree to which the project manager values innovation and practical processes over sticking with the plan.
- The degree to which the project manager is comfortable with an uncertain and changing environment.
- The project manager's skill and commitment to sharing information as needed with all stakeholders.
- The project manager's level of commitment to the team and the willingness to promote team collaboration.
- The project manager's ability to motivate the team, delegate, and then get out of the way.

And finally, in order to form a successful team, it is important to consider:

- The team members' ability to make independent decisions.
- The team members' commitment and capability to collaborate and work as a group.
- The degree to which the team members can communicate in person.
- The degree to which the stakeholder is willing and able to become a team member.
- The team members' ability to problem solve and come up with new ideas.
- The team member's knowledge and experience with the application area and the tools for creating the project result.

A readiness assessment will ensure that the project team has the right experience, leadership and competence to perform in an Agile setting, as well as whether the unique project requires a separate function for project management and business analysis, or if a combination of both is appropriate.

If the Agile project management team is a highly experienced and motivated team that can conduct the functions of business analysis skillfully and properly, it can be argued that a separate business analysis resource may not be needed.

It is critical, however, to evaluate the expertise and experience of the team thoroughly, particularly the background of the project managers to ensure their

Characteristics of an Agile Project:

- *Innovative/experimental*
- *Requires active engagement/input on the customer's part*
- *Needs a team of highly skilled and motivated professionals*
- *Requires close communication within the team and with the customer for optimal outcome*



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skills include the areas of elicitation, analysis and assessment — key elements of the business analysis role which are essential for understanding the features that the user is describing.

Learn the Agile way

Organizations need to become familiar with Agile frameworks in order to assess their current capabilities prior to adopting Agile project management. It is important for key executives, senior managers and project managers/leaders to learn about the Agile Manifesto, and the lexicon that surrounds Agile.

The main principles behind the Agile Manifesto are:

- Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable [products].
- Changing requirements should be welcomed, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage.
- The delivery of working [products] should be frequently, from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, with a preference to the shorter timescale.
- Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
- Projects should be built around motivated individuals. Give these individuals the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.
- The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.
- Working [products] is the primary measure of progress.
- Agile processes promote sustainable development. The sponsors, developers and users should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely.
- Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.
- Simplicity — the art of maximizing the amount of work not done — is essential.
- The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.
- At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

Expanding this knowledge further can be achieved with training courses, by reading books and publications and referring to web resources, such as the Agile Alliance (www.agilealliance.org) and the Project Management Institute (PMI)[®] (www.pmi.org)².



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Once the decision has been made to proceed with Agile, it is critical not to turn the implementation into a “big bang” project. Instead the company should select a small (and relatively easy) project from its “innovative projects portfolio” and build a team to execute the project by assigning it to the right project managers and the most experienced team members to the project.

Organizations should also take an iterative (or an agile) approach when it comes to introducing it to their organizations. Slowly and over time, they will learn the lessons to be able to build more teams and execute more projects using Agile project management effectively.

Once the transition to Agile is underway, the team and the organization should conduct ‘Reflection Workshops’ to assess the maturity and improve the team and the organization’s capability to execute Agile projects effectively.

The Future is Here

Although the agile movement was the “brain child” of the software development and IT world, it has grown and evolved. There is no question that today agile project management can be, and has been, applied successfully to a broad range of projects. Users and stakeholders have benefited from the agile project management approach — one in which the end user and the project team are partnered in a collaborative effort focused on the project culture, vision and the end result.

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To learn how Agile project management can help your organization achieve its goals, contact an expert at +1 888.374.8884 or info@strategyex.com.

References

1. “The Agile Manifesto.” www.agilemanifesto.org. Ward Cunningham, 2001. Web.
2. PMI is a registered mark of the Project Management Institute, Inc.

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