AGILE – The art of adapting to change and innovation

Increasing complexity and the pace of change requires a new mindset and approach to leadership

Today's world of work is a **fast-paced race in a complex and uncertain global field**. Companies around the world are facing new competitive threats, changing market dynamics, technological disruption and the ever-changing needs of empowered customers. The pressure is on for companies to adapt to change and more quickly deliver better products and services to customer. Traditional leadership thinking and practices are failing to meet today's challenges. Leaders must more effectively engage employees, foster creativity, speed up delivery and mitigate risks to outpace the competition.

Until recently, Agile was seen as a set of management practices relevant only to software development. That's because Agile's initial advocates were software developers and its foundational document was the 2001 Manifesto for Agile Software Development. Agile's emergence as a **global movement extending beyond software** is driven by the discovery that the only way for organizations to cope with today's turbulent, customer-driven marketplace is to become Agile. **Agile enables organizations to master continuous change**. It permits firms to flourish in a world that is increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous.

Since its inception, Agile has been used across industries to develop software, hardware, networks of interacting functions, autonomous vehicles, schools, hospitals, governments and marketing, and to manage the operations of organizations and **almost everything we use in our daily lives**.

Today, Agile methodologies are widely used for:

- The development of products and services
- Strategic planning activities
- Supply chain management and management of the parent organizations

Conditions are ripe **for Agile teams** in any situation where problems are complex, solutions are at first unclear, project requirements are likely to change, close collaboration with end users is feasible, and creative teams will outperform command-and-control groups.

What is Agile?
The fundamental essence of Agile processes is adaptivity

The word 'agile' means 'the ability to move, think and understand very quickly'. It generally signifies a highly skilled behavior, in both life and business contexts. In fact, the term 'agile' has a reputation for being overused and used incorrectly not always in the way it was meant to.

Agile is a collective concept that includes different techniques that **provide the ability to adapt quickly to new conditions**. Agile methodology focuses on delivering the features that have the greatest business value first, and then communicating with customers in real time to enable direct feedback from them. Agile also requires strict management of the cost, time and scope of projects.

Coming back to its origins, Agile reflects the view of visionary software developers who believed that "uncovering better ways of developing software" would require a reversal of some fundamental assumptions of 20th-century management. They valued "individuals and interactions over processes and tools, working software over comprehensive documentation, customer collaboration over contract negotiation and responding to change over following a plan."

As Agile is increasingly applied to large-scale projects, the gains that become possible at firms are dramatic, particularly the ability to **deliver instant, frictionless, personalized responsiveness at scale**, such as Spotify's Discover Weekly.

Additionally, as software itself becomes a critical driver in almost all businesses, Agile is now spreading to many **kinds of organizations** and **functions**, as recognized in 2016 by Harvard Business Review in the article 'Embracing Agile'.

How does Agile work?
Mindset & individuals over tools & processes

There are several Agile methodologies that can be used to manage a project – **Scrum being the most widely used** and the one that we will explain further.

Agile methodologies, particularly Scrum, are based on a set of **values, principles, team roles, events (meetings) and artifacts**, and the rules that bind them together. Agile methodologies are alternatives to command-and-control management styles. The essence of Scrum is a small, self-governing team (a Scrum Team) of 4–9 people, which is highly flexible, adaptive and cross-functional. Scrum uses the concept of timeboxing to define the amount of time the team should allocate for each event. The Scrum team members should have all the knowledge and skills they need to achieve the agreed goals. The teams autonomously decide the priorities and resource allocations, and are designed to stay close to the customers and adapt quickly to changing conditions.

Here are some of the main components of Agile methodology implementation:

- A Scrum Team – with a Product Owner, Development Team and Scrum Master – is set up and empowered by leadership to take decisionst
- The Scrum Team follows three principles: 1) transparency (the work must be visible at all times); 2) inspection (the Scrum team must frequently inspect the work and progress towards the sprint goal to detect undesirable variances); and 3) adaptation (if one or more aspects deviate outside unacceptable limits, an adjustment must be done as soon as possible to minimize further deviation)
- The team completes the following Scrum events: the Sprint, Sprint Planning, Daily Scrum, Sprint Review and Sprint Retrospective (all these events are timeboxed, so the team knows the maximum duration of each meeting)
- The Scrum Team completes small intervals (Sprints) of active cooperation. These Sprints should not exceed four weeks and should have a specific goal. During these intervals, the Scrum Team should complete daily status meetings (Daily Scrums) of no more than 15 minutes
- At the end of each Sprint, the customer receives the result (in the Sprint Review), which is already suitable to use in their business. The Scrum Team's processes and ways of working are then analyzed for improvement (in the Sprint Retrospective)
- The Scrum Team works closely with the customer throughout the development process and delivers all the work agreed to accomplish the Sprint goal

- The team is always ready to review and adapt at any stage of the project, and can easily implement changes to improve the final product

Unlike classic project management methods, **Scrum focuses more on personal responsibility**. The individuals that are performing the tasks are the ones taking ownership and estimating the completion times.

With the right, competent approach to the implementation of the system, the development of any project – even the most complex and energy-consuming project – can turn into a well-functioning mechanism and real collaborative work.

What are the advantages of Agile?

Scrum improves how we work in several ways:

- **It produces higher product quality**, due to constant testing and continuous improvement as small increments of the work are performed
- **It results in higher customer satisfaction**, as a result of the constant demonstration of improvements to customers, and the fact that customers are kept engaged with the project
- **It offers increased project control** – for example, with the Daily Scrum meetings
- **There are reduced risks** because of the short Sprints, the brief time between feature development, and the constant adaption to the client's/customer's needs and preferences throughout the development process
- **It provides faster ROI** because it focuses on business value, allows the client/customer to determine the priority of features, and creates a functional, ready-to-market product with just a few iterations

How can you implement Agile? And in what situations can you use Agile methodology? Start small and let the word spread

Large companies typically launch change programs as massive efforts. However, the most successful introductions of Agile usually start small. They often begin in IT, where software developers are likely to be familiar with the principles. Agile might then spread to another function, with the original practitioners acting as coaches. Success achieved in one or more departments tends to create a group of **passionate evangelists** who can hardly wait to tell others in the organization how well Agile works.

Successful Agile implementation requires a mindset change, real commitment from teams and leadership, and perseverance to remove the potential bottlenecks that will occur due to the existing organizational structure, which has several layers of management and bureaucracy.

The top three factors that are most helpful in scaling Agile are: 1) internal Agile coaches; 2) executive sponsorship; and 3) training programs provided by the company.

Conclusion

Scrum can **create a safe environment that enables teams to experiment** and, most importantly, learn from their test results and continuously improve. Instead of doing an extensive phase of planning at the beginning and only testing at the end (like the waterfall approach), Scrum simply provides the space for teams to try, test and innovate faster based on repetitive cycles of input from the customer. The team plans just enough to have a reasonable hypothesis of what may work and **goes with it**.

We have recently gone through the Scrum Alliance certification experience, which included attending a live training session. Although many of the concepts, rules, thinking and methods we have learned can be easily understood from the Scrum Guide, we have found it valuable to simulate a Sprint. The main insights for us were:

- It takes time for teams to internalize the concept of self-governing teams, where your title and seniority within an organization no longer matters – just the work you deliver
- In the beginning, you get the feeling that everything is chaotic and that you are losing control, so you can imagine how this might be one of the blockers for implementation
- Scrum is easy to understand but takes time to master, and a test-and-learn mindset is as critical as being open to failing fast and then improving
- Constant feedback is one of the core elements of Scrum and that is why being transparent is so important
- For Scrum to work, leadership needs to be onboard and support and understand the process during implementation. It should empower the Scrum Team and not overturn team decisions or add review layers and controls to ensure that mistakes aren't repeated. Failure should be a part of the process. With the best of intentions, such interventions erode the benefits that Agile innovation can deliver

Implementing Agile can be a step forward. It involves a lot of work, and emotions and passions run high as people and processes collide. Hiring an Agile coach may help companies maneuver these challenges but not without effort from the entire organization – from the executives and senior management to the programmers. As with any good harvest, **the yield from Agile depends on the efforts that go into implementation.**

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If you are interested in getting a Scrum certification, here are some suggestions (non-exhaustive list):

- **https://www.scrumguides.org/docs/scrumguide/v2017/2017-Scrum-Guide-US.pdf**
- **https://www.scrum.org/professional-scrum-certifications/professional-scrum-master-assessments**
- **https://www.scrumalliance.org/learn-about-scrum?gclid=CjwKCAjw1_PqBRBIEiwA71rmtW8WKca9IeMoCM1jQ46w0wTjIUongwmveG_d9xpv8DxA3t2iEnrHqxoC5TQQAvD_BwE**
- **https://www.scaledagile.com/**