

What Agile Methods Mean to Your Process, People and Products



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The concept of agile development is not new. However, many technologists still stick to the age-old notion that software development can be easily designed and the outputs predicted without giving much thought to the more dynamic factors of projects, such as communication lines, people, and change.

Project managers eventually realised that a lot of projects failed because of rigid requirements, faulty design, and the inability of project teams to adapt to change. For the most part, clients or end-users' requirements changed through the course of development lifecycles, that by the time applications were ready for deployment, the end products were a good degree different from what was initially planned. This would have been alright, except that towards the end of the development lifecycle, time and financial resources have overshot initial estimates by a good measure.

Instead of pointing their fingers at development teams or clients, project managers learned to allow adjustments in their methodologies. In fact, many studies have shown that the most successful projects were those that followed agile principles, proving that model-driven methods are not always the best when it came to managing changes, fast-paced project implementation, or even meeting market demands.

But before adopting agile practices, project sponsors and managers should ask how agile methods could impact their products, internal operations, and people.

Impact on People and Their Roles

A key agile principle, "individuals and interactions over processes and tools," emphasises communication and collaboration of project team members. Instead of defining the roles of team members, more importance is given to how well they can perform tasks as a team and create a working version of software. Teamwork cannot be overstated in agile processes, as each member can play the part of the end-user, leader, and engineer. To be truly successful, project managers should allow team members to wear cross-functional hats, communicate freely, and focus on team goals instead of individual, or role-based-functions.

While it has been initially believed that agile method worked best with co-located teams, experiences of outsourcing service providers proved that this also worked, and perhaps better-with the offshore outsourcing development models. In the first place, collaboration and free-flowing communication is the norm, and not the physical set-up of the workplace.

Impact on Process

Processes take secondary priority in agile methods. Instead of going through particular stages of the development lifecycle, rapid and short iterations move the project forward, allowing for flexibility in changing the course of the project. Moreover, instead of drowning in documentation as dictated by requirements and design, most documentation is in the form of information exchange among project members. Design and actual product are often inconsistent until the deployment stage.

Impact on Product and Quality

Instead of delivering software that has all the knots and bolts in place according to its original design, the highest priority is satisfying the need of the customer with a simple but working version. The adage, "in perpetual beta" also applies to agile method; software improves with every iteration until all the "nice to have" features are in place. Simplicity allows for more flexibility in change requests, especially because end-users and sponsors or clients eventually discover new requirements along the way.