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Agile can deliver – when you know where you're going

There can be no doubt that an Agile approach to software development can deliver substantial benefits to the business. However, while Agile makes big promises, it also presents significant challenges and is as prone to failure as any other methodology.

Despite this, demand for Agile remains high – at Capita, we are asked about it almost every time we meet a new client. But most often, we are called in when an Agile project has gone wrong.

So, why does Agile go off track and what can you do to stop it from happening? This whitepaper is a summary of what we've learned over years of implementing Agile and rescuing Agile projects.

Agile – lost in translation

One of the biggest hurdles that Agile projects face is a fundamental mismatch between the realities of doing Agile and the expectations of the business. This is where things can start to go wrong before the project is even off the ground.

Agile offers these benefits:

- Agile will deliver value to the business much faster than traditional software development methods

- Agile is flexible so it will reduce the risk from changing requirements

- Agile is transparent – everyone will be able to see what is going on at each stage

- Agile's rapid delivery and frequent iterations reduce the cost of development

But this is how those benefits are frequently misinterpreted:

- Agile is quick and easy

- Agile means we can figure out what we're doing as we go along

- Agile makes it easy to communicate and doesn't need lots of documentation

- Agile is a cheap way to develop software

These distortions sow the seeds for the failure of an Agile project.

It's not quick and it's not easy

The speed in Agile comes from developing in small stages over short periods of time. The business will realise the benefits of this provided that:

- There is an understanding that the project will also fail faster – which provides opportunities to make fixes along the way rather than waiting until the end of a big expensive failure

- The software is built in a way that makes it easy to change – but this takes discipline to do well

- Everyone recognises that the product you end up with may not be the product you thought you wanted at the start – but it will be one that will deliver value for the business

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Agile involves thinking about the end product and how you can get there in a different way. Businesses are used to the "time, cost, quality" triangle and the idea that one of these three elements will need to flex in order to deliver on the others. Agile adds a fourth element: functionality. This means that Agile can deliver faster, more cost-effective improvement, but the end product will only include the functionality that matters.

Businesses need to understand where the drive for Agile is coming from. If it's the development team then, nine times out of ten, we find that the wider organisation will not be ready for the challenges and changes that Agile brings. The drive needs to come from the top of the organisation as well.

Finally, but just as importantly, Agile is not a light-weight way of undertaking projects. It involves substantial commitment from the whole business, not just the software team. It will most likely involve changes in working culture and practices. It is also vital that there is a strong, engaged product owner who remains in place and involved throughout the project. In our experience, when an Agile project starts well and then goes off track, it is usually because the level of business engagement has dropped and the project owner has been called off onto other priorities.

We'll know we've arrived when we get there

One of the major complaints against Agile is that it never delivers anything. This may be due to the issue described above where the end product contains only the necessary functionality and not everything that the business hoped to include. It may also be because the development has become stuck in an endless loop of iteration, improving and improving until one small, perfect product is created that has little to do with the need it was originally trying to address.

Agile's flexibility is seductive – but you still have to be disciplined and controlled and keep a clear eye on the desired results for the business. Results must be focused on benefits and value, not features.

To maintain a clear view of the benefits required, it is important to engage with the actual end users of the product as well as the stakeholders in the business – they may not be the same people. Delivering the functionality that the user needs, rather than what the business wants, will be the better value option in the long run.

At the same time, don't get trapped into fulfilling the needs of users who are entrenched in old habits – they will not be able to anticipate what they might need in the future and the end product may quickly become obsolete. Henry Ford is often misquoted as saying "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." Whilst it is unfortunately not an accurate quote the sentiment is true.

No project is an island

Communication is a vital component in an effective Agile project. But having daily stand-ups, a Scrum Master and a Project Owner will not be enough within an established business. Organisations have their own reporting structures, tools and techniques that they rely on. Ignoring these or expecting the organisation to embrace a whole new way of reporting is asking for trouble; the business is unable to understand the progress in the project and won't be able to identify emerging problems (in a recent survey undertaken by Capita, 50% of the respondents said that difficulty reporting on progress and work outstanding was a major challenge in implementing Agile).

In addition, Agile projects are often taking place within a wider programme running on traditional lines. Assurance and governance techniques need to adapt to work with Agile and help integrate Agile elements with the overall project or programme. The larger the scale of the Agile implementation, the greater the level of governance and control that is required.

Linked to this issue around reporting is the matter of documentation. Agile does not mean doing away with documentation – it is just as important as in any other project. Without it, how will new team members get up to speed?

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Again, the difference is in how you get there. Rather than starting out with a detailed and lengthy requirements document, Agile begins with a short brief and the details are defined as you go. You still end up with just as detailed a document, but this one describes the product that has been built rather than the product the business thought it wanted at the start.

Less is not more

Like any sophisticated machine, an Agile team is only as strong as its individual components and it won't function properly if a key component is missing.

It's tempting for a business to see Agile as a way to use fewer expensive personnel. But an effective Agile team requires more than a Scrum Master, a Product Owner and a couple of developers. It needs user experience expertise (to make sure the product is delivering for the end user), business analysis expertise (to make sure the product is addressing future as well as current needs) and quality assurance and testing expertise.

In all cases, and especially for testing, the personnel need to have experience of Agile and be fully integrated into the project. Testing must happen frequently, and testers in Agile need to help define the requirements in a way that is easy to develop and test against. This is very different from the traditional (and perhaps adversarial) separation between testing and development and involves a fundamental rethink of the team.

When an Agile team is working properly, the individuals will start to work across their disciplines and merge their roles. This culture shift within the team can be as much of a challenge as the cultural change that Agile requires in the business as a whole.

Looking for an Agile balance

From our experience, it is extremely rare that a project can be 100% Agile, especially in large and complex organisations, and it is unrealistic to expect the entire business to reshape itself around Agile. Rather, Agile needs to integrate in a way that delivers real business value. The trick is to balance the fast and flexible benefits of Agile with the business' needs for clearly defined requirements, phased deliverables and structured reporting.

How we can help

At Capita, we adopt a hybrid approach to Agile which aims to accelerate business value, maintain control of costs and minimise business risk.

Our portfolio of Agile services can help you to:

- Respond to demand for Agile in the best way for the business
- Figure out if Agile is right for you and how to make it happen
- Achieve the benefits of Agile in a practical way, with either a pure or hybrid approach
- Get an injection of Agile skills and experience into your business
- Put the practices in place to make sure Agile delivers
- Reduce risk through rigorous quality assurance and testing
- Deploy robust governance and control mechanisms that ensure Agile delivers
- Fix Agile if it's gone wrong

For further information about these services please contact:

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