

Four Ways in which the Agile Software Development Movement has Influenced Our Practice

At Satori, we believe agile software development concepts have broad applicability to the way projects are managed across the enterprise. We have integrated agile project management innovations into the way we deliver management consulting engagements, and we are assisting our clients in their transition to improved project performance.

Agile approaches enable teams to get to high quality results quickly by planning, delivering, and learning from rapid, time-bound project outputs, all the while getting feedback from customers, key stakeholders communities of practice in a way that enables rapid integration of project team outputs and accelerated return on project investments.

From Agile IT to Agile PM

In recent years, “Scrum” has become the de facto standard for agile technology teams. Scrum is a term that was coined by Takeuchi and Nonaka to describe “hyperproductive” product development practices and refers to the strategy that rugby teams use to get balls back into play by passing it within a team and moving up the field as a unit, “bit by bit”.

IT Projects using the Scrum methodology employ incremental and iterative delivery of working software that customers can use after each “sprint”. After one or more sprints, a feature-set is released into production. This approach is a break from the traditional “waterfall” approach of developing software in which users are engaged at first in order to translate their needs into written requirements documents to ensure everything is captured up-front. The technology team then designs, codes, tests, all in a sequential manner, and then re-engages the user community in acceptance testing after months (or in some cases years). As a result, traditional waterfall development approaches view changes over the course of the project unfavorably, as the requirements must be “frozen” for the system to be developed in its entirety. This mindset, often found in corporate project management practice in general, is a vestige of project management assumptions that were employed by engineers and planners in the 1950s and 60s, often for large defense or aerospace related programs spanning several years.

At Satori, we have distilled the key elements of agile into our project management approach, and are putting them into practice to develop new organizational capabilities for our clients. Four key components are:

1. Eliminating non value-added work
2. Welcoming new insight
3. Delivering as fast as possible
4. Facilitating project team learning.

1. Eliminating Non Value-Added Work

In manufacturing environments, waste is often represented by unnecessary movement of materials, excess inventory, or shipping products that do not work. In project organizations, traditional “waterfall” project methodologies create waste, as the requirements so meticulously documented up front many weeks or months before often include features and functions that are no longer important, useful or necessary at implementation. Waterfall practices also create opportunities for waste because they do not produce outputs with which users can interact until the end of the project, thus limiting the opportunities for rich communication with the organization’s communities of practice that are so critical for enabling new innovations.

2. Welcoming New Insight

Internal and external conditions continually change as teams define and implement strategies, and as projects progress through their life cycles. If project organizations do not account for continually shifting conditions, they run the risk of developing irrelevant products, improving business processes that are no longer vital to the organization’s competitiveness, or releasing software that does not meet the needs of customers. Change requires learning and adaptation. Agile project management approaches enable project teams to regularly work on the outputs that are of highest priority at that time, and that will deliver the most value to the business.

3. Delivering as Fast as Possible

Long cycle times for projects create opportunities for wasted investment. Long delivery cycles mean that by the time a project is completed, what it delivers may no longer be relevant or useful to the customer who requested it. Building in short cycles that produce tangible results for internal or external customers helps teams reduce risk, build momentum, learn from experience, and avoid irrelevance. Moreover, delivering as quickly as possible enables project benefits to be captured sooner. For example, in new product introductions, delivering faster means capturing new revenue sooner, preempting competitors with new innovations, and learning about what works and what does not so that the organization can maintain its edge in the marketplace.

4. Facilitating Team Learning

Retrospectives conducted upon the conclusion of each sprint enable teams to systematically learn from experience so that they can improve upon their strategies, reduce the risk of failures and surprises, and deliver high- quality outputs for internal and external customers. When teams are able to take responsibility for their own learning and improvement, they are able to apply the collective wisdom of diverse individuals from multiple functional, technical, and cultural backgrounds, enabling the project team and the client organization to solve problems and continually adapt and improve in ways that would otherwise not be possible.

Satori’s Approach to Agile Project Delivery

A key way in which our teams translate these principles into practice is by enabling deliverables, improvements and value to our clients to be delivered in time-bound “sprints”. Before each, we work

hand-in-hand with clients to define and prioritize a backlog of expected outcomes to be accomplished by the end of the sprint, and upon conclusion of the sprint, we jointly review our work against the commitments made, make adjustments as necessary, and incorporate improvements into the next one.

Our clients benefit from this approach in the following ways:

- We surface risks early-on in the process so strategies, processes and projects can be adapted and adjusted in a way that mitigates or eliminates their potential impact.
- We readily align project priorities with business needs to focus on the outputs that are most important to at the time.
- We actively seek feedback, formally reflect on intended versus actual results, and incorporate improvements from one sprint to the next.
- Most importantly, we enable our clients to translate new strategies into operational results quickly and effectively so they can succeed in complex, rapidly changing organizational environments.