



Agile: Balancing development agility with management control



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Introduction

Traditional waterfall delivery is highly reliant on the capture of comprehensive and detailed requirements - but few business users can articulate this level and detail of requirement; even when they can the requirements can often be too focused on historical needs and sadly lacking in meeting the challenge of the future (a future that will have arrived by the time the waterfall approach has finally delivered the specified system!). It is biased in favour of those who can shout the loudest and is driven by the need to satisfy the terms of a contract rather than deliver the business outcomes the business actually seeks.

This need for greater development flexibility, responsiveness and focus on delivering desired business outcomes has led to the creation of many 'Agile' approaches, in particular Scrum, and is fast becoming accepted as a part of the mainstream of systems delivery methods - but it is still often poorly understood and treated with suspicion by business management (the essential suspicion being that 'agility' is an excuse for lack of rigor and/or lack of control). For example, in the past two years we have been told by major UK organisations that we could not have testers as part of our teams from the outset as analysts were paid to get it right; that we could not have 'programming pairs' as they were not prepared to have two people do one person's job; and that we did not need trained Scrum Masters as the project managers were more than capable of doing the job. There appears to be a gap in understanding and this is not helped by the way that business management and IT practitioners tend to take entrenched positions based on a partial understanding of the Agile approach.

Agile is based on a 'belief system' (see below), so attempts to have official certifications as a badge of entry are always going to be dubious, which unsettles managers used to the 'certainty' surrounding things like Prince qualifications. On the other hand, when discussing Milestones and Checkpoints, on the LinkedIn Agile Forum it is a little disturbing to see Agile practitioners say that progress reporting is something internal to a team and therefore there is no need for milestone planning and reporting to business management. We need to find a way to bring both sides together and to give more mainstream credibility to Agile, to the benefit of all.

The Agile Manifesto, a statement of beliefs

When Agile was first articulated the authors deliberately set out to avoid being doctrinaire and instead outlined a series of core beliefs:

- ✓ Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- ✓ Working software over comprehensive documentation
- ✓ Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- ✓ Responding to change over following a 'set in concrete' plan

These have come to be seen as an explicit rebuttal of the waterfall approach, and an endorsement of a rigid stand against the sorts of behaviours seen as being at the core of the waterfall and its adherents. In fact they are nothing of the sort, and are actually a reaction to the poor management practices that are found regardless of the methodology employed. Too much of IT Management has come to rely on tools and processes, seeing software delivery as a commodity to be delivered by the cheapest source if a process is followed; wanting to see deliverables at every stage often to the detriment of working software; adopting a view that rather than talk to customers you do what they ask for regardless of the validity of the request and then protect yourself with a rigid contract; and finally you plan to a low level of



detail and then follow the plan because that is what is enshrined in the contract. This is as applicable to many Agile deliveries as Waterfall ones if the philosophy behind Agile has not been understood.

Adoption of Agile

To adopt Agile can be a painful and soul-searching process, and carries with it a fair degree of risk. Central to that pain is that in all large organizations what management crave is certainty. Conservative, risk adverse, waterfall-driven delivery is seen to deliver more of that certainty, despite its obvious and well-documented failings of lack of adaptability and failure to deliver what the business actually needs. But it is familiar and it offers an illusion that things are under control.

By comparison Agile starts off by saying that you are not certain what you will end up delivering, so from the outset this is unsettling. As the development continues the needs and deliverables evolve within the cost/time constraints – and again this is unsettling to business managers accustomed to seeing a fixed, detailed, bottom-up plan and measuring progress against that plan. To be comfortable with Agile development what business managers/sponsors need is the reassurance of some form of planning and delivery status reporting against that plan that provides early warning of delivery problems.

Controlling Agile projects

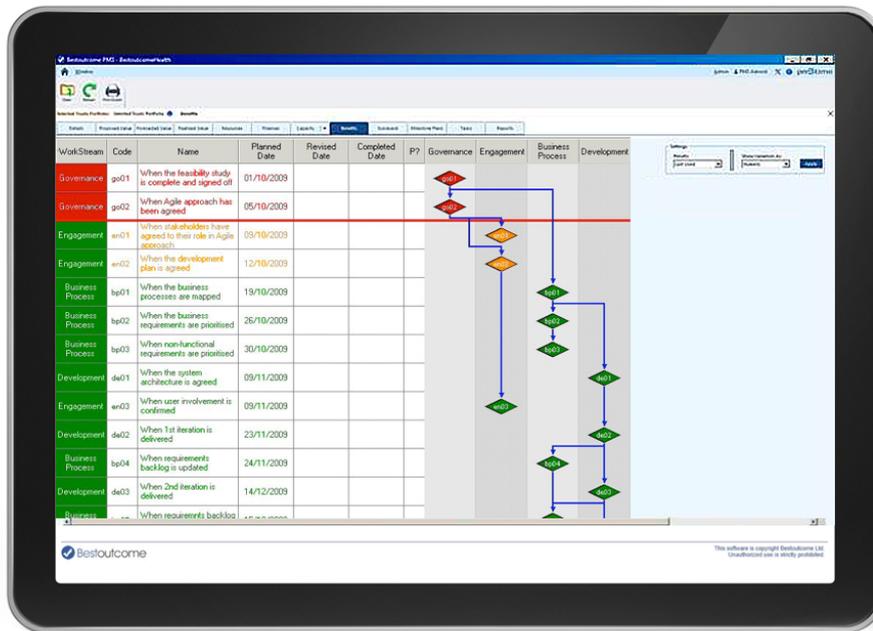
Traditional waterfall approaches predominantly involve users at the front-end and back-end of the project lifecycle; Agile involves users and stakeholders throughout the lifecycle. Key to this involvement is for users to be able to understand and participate in the project and how it is progressing. Typical project management tools can be complicated and difficult for non-IT professionals to understand and therefore participate. What is needed is a project management tool that talks the language of the business. For example, Bestoutcome's PM3 tool plans and tracks projects top-down, not bottom up. The outcome-driven milestone plans developed in PM3 are high-level and are developed with the users and stakeholders actively involved. This collaborative approach to planning gains early 'buy in' by all affected parties and delivers a plan that is more achievable and more realistic. Milestones are hit and the empowered development teams make decisions on what conditional requirements can be de-scoped so that delivery dates are met. Key to this approach is the team doing its utmost to make the milestone drop code date. This may mean adding resources, de-scoping or doing a different set of activities. This can be very time consuming if detailed activity plans are constantly being amended – but the milestones do not tend to change a great deal although the underlying activities can. Keeping these milestones fairly constant gives confidence to the team including the sponsors/stakeholders and saves constant re-planning. Nothing saps the confidence of stakeholders more than a constantly changing plan.

A tool like PM3, due to its non-technical language and high-level view, enables stakeholders to be involved in key areas of the project including:

- ✓ Project status (Red/Amber/Green 'traffic light' reports);
- ✓ Risk, issue and assumption management;
- ✓ Outcome delivery (benefits management);
- ✓ Project accounting.



So whilst the project team, under the guidance of the Scrum Master, does what it does best, a Project Manager using a tool like PM3 can translate the results into the things business managers want to see, such as delivery RAG statuses and resource utilization charts.



Risks, issues and assumptions are central to the effective management of an Agile project as they to a large extent determine what is included in the final delivery. In PM3 they can be reported effectively back to the business in RAG status reports. In this way the Agile process is reflected back to the business in a consistent style alongside the more familiar waterfall style projects. This is important because over time the real advantages of Agile will become obvious to the business: assured delivery of a working solution; closer alignment between what the business expected and what they received; no hidden surprises; and most of all the timely identification of blockers early enough in the lifecycle to enable management to find an acceptable solution at a reasonable cost.

A true synergy of desired outcomes

To deliver successful software it is vital that the focus be on delivery of desired business outcomes; you want short cycles of working code and not long cycles of paper representations of the desired outcome. You need to focus on business value and the business has to be given the tools to deliver that value into the business. This can only be achieved with IT and the Business working as one in a single team. These are the values that Agile enshrines as laid down by the Agile Manifesto. Agile as implemented by too many is failing to convey that spirit to the business in a winning fashion and barriers exist which are preventing the Agile teams from delivering effectively to the business. Traditional project reporting environments are too embedded into the traditional conservative culture of IT delivery where in fact process, artifact and contractual obligation have come to take precedence over the delivery of business value. With a tool like PM3 Senior Management both within IT and the broader Business can receive the information it desires in the style and format that it finds acceptable; but very importantly it does this in way that allows the benefits of Agile to be realized without compromise.