Virtual Toolkit for Agile Projects

Agile methodology traditionally encouraged in-person work. However, COVID-19 proved it was possible for even large project teams to effectively implement this approach remotely.

12 Principles of Agile

1. Satisfy customers through early and continuous delivery.
2. Welcome changing requirements, even late in the project.
3. Deliver working software frequently.
4. Business people and developers must work together daily.
5. Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need and trust them to get the job done.
6. Prioritize face-to-face communication.
7. Use working software as the primary measure of progress.
8. Maintain a constant, sustainable working pace.
9. Communicate to teams that continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.
10. Simplicity is essential.
11. The best architects, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.
12. Regularly reflect on how to become more effective, then tune and adjust team behavior accordingly.

While the benefits of face-to-face work are a core tenet of an Agile culture, virtual teams have increasingly been using the Agile framework for successful remote and hybrid product development. COVID-19 forced development teams across industries to implement virtual Agile strategies and proved that distributed teams and virtual projects can be successful.

Increasingly, organizations are moving toward permanent hybrid and remote work environments in order to recruit the best talent and retain current employees. That means organizations will have to permanently adapt their Agile strategies to fit the new work world.

In our engagements with organizations on virtual Agile projects, we've found that the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful remote project is having the right virtual tools. In this article, we'll explore four things that are critical to a virtual Agile project: communication tech, collaboration tech, a shared file repository, and work management software.

Communication

Communication is key to every project, but it is especially important when working remotely on an Agile project where collaboration is essential. Email is necessary to track important conversations, decisions, and detailed requirements. To create a nimble and flexible environment, email alone will not suffice. The Agile Manifesto prioritizes face-to-face communication, which can be easily adapted to virtual settings. For example, successful remote projects foster effective face-to-face conversations by encouraging team members to turn on their cameras during stand-ups or other meetings. It is important to note that culture and team norms are vital in this area. Simply requiring camera use will not enable effective communications within distributed teams. Instead, the focus should be on creating an open, honest, and engaged culture. Camera usage will follow as the team norms stabilize with the larger team culture.

The right technology is critical for doing this well. Communication technology that fosters Agile methodologies should support large groups of stakeholders speaking face-to-face in one call. This is particularly crucial as an Agile Manifesto Principle. For example, a ceremony such as Scaled Agile Framework's (SAFe) Program Increment (PI) Planning is suggested to be held face-to-face.

Agile communication tools should be optimized for the following:

- Quickly contacting and communicating with team members individually or in groups.
- Web conferencing with multiple people on a call.
- Presenting or sharing one's screen for demos and iterations of work.
- Chatting in meetings so requirements and details can be captured accurately.
- Facilitating side communication without disruptions.
- Video conferencing so that communication channels can be optimized as much as possible.
- Sending files and pictures in a nimble manner during meetings.
- Scheduling meetings with web conference.
- Allowing for people to dial in if needed.

The following communication applications are recommended for Agile communication:

- Adobe Connect
- Google Meets
- Slack
- MS Teams
- Zoom
- Skype

Collaboration

To encourage a truly collaborative work environment, there needs to be an opportunity to work effectively across teams and with multiple team members. In Agile, collaboration is essential for things like planning work and dependencies/interdependencies; providing a visual queue; solving problems; working through root causes, user flows, and process flows; requirements gathering; usability testing (HCD/UX/UI Design); and low-fidelity wireframes.

One of the more complex experiences to replicate is a whiteboard session, which would normally occur in person. There are some key benefits to virtual whiteboards. For example, they allow for easy export in (PDF or PNG) files that can then be shared across the team and edited throughout the project. In tandem with a recording function from one of the tools above, technology enables Agile teams to reference conversations at a later date, to provide greater context. Using these tools means conversations and collaborations are recorded and stored online, and no extra work is needed.

Agile collaboration tools should be optimized for the following:

- Real-time changes displayable to all collaborators during internal and external workshops and meetings.
- Encouraging Agile creativity and innovation.
- Quick mobility for brainstorming, creating, and collecting ideas, thoughts, requirements and details in one place.
- Capturing and representing ideas and proposals to clients in a digestible manner.

The following virtual whiteboard applications are recommended for Agile collaboration:

- Miro
- Mural
- Draw.io

Why You Should Build Your Remote Agile Capabilities

More organizations are adopting remote and hybrid work models. It is important for those organizations to also build their capabilities for virtual Agile projects so they don't miss out on opportunities because they lack the necessary tools.

Virtual tools offer many benefits, including:

- Allowing everyone, virtually or in-person, to attend, participate, and collaborate.
- Cutting down expenses.
- Optimizing teams for collaboration and efficiency.
- Enabling recording of virtual video meetings and other sessions for people not able to join a meeting live or to onboard and train new hires.
- Documenting everything in real time, with less work required afterward to fulfil documentation requirements.

Shared Drives

Having accessible drive space where the entire team can upload or access important information necessary to complete work in a timely manner is extremely important in an environment where everyone must be able to move flexibly. Real-time collaboration via shared drives cuts down on duplicated efforts and saves time when producing deliverables that require collaboration between multiple stakeholders. One of the 12 Principles of Agile says that 'business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.' This means that there must be collaboration and transparency between business and Agile teams. A shared drive with open access to both clients and team allows for active client engagement and enables Agile teams to complete products faster and with higher end quality.

Team members and clients can easily upload documents in an environment everyone can access to ensure successful and timely development. People often underestimate the importance of this – in a non-virtual setting the lack of access or ability to easily upload needed resources can hamper strict development timelines (sprints).

Agile file-sharing tools should be optimized for the following:

- Easy remote access to project files by all team members.
- Real-time collaboration by multiple stakeholders on documents and deliverables.
- Client access to files and deliverables for continuous feedback processes.
- The ability to access version control for files uploaded and edited, and/or track changes made by multiple collaborators.

The following shared drives are recommended for Agile collaboration:

- Confluence
- Google Drive
- SharePoint
- Box

Sprint Management

Sprint management tools are critical for every Agile project's success. These are necessary for recording stories, tickets, and work for developers, so they can prioritize accordingly. They also provide the purpose and roadmap to support a project's success and are essential for creating burn-down charts and monitoring the project's progress.

Agile sprint management tools should be optimized for the following:

- Tracking and reporting work.
- Linking work and dependencies.
- Providing correct documentation attached to the appropriate work.
- Organizing work into sprints and Kanban formats with backlogs.
- Making hierarchies to break down.
- Allowing an environment to track progress of work (for development, testing, requirements, and design).
- Support reporting (especially for government contracts that get audited).

The following sprint management tools are recommended for Agile collaboration:

- Jira
- ServiceNow
- AzureDevOps (ADO)
- Monday.com
- Trello
- ProductPlan
- ProductBoard
- Aha!
- Asana

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Agile's focus on continuous delivery and providing frequent and incremental value doesn't just produce better project results, it also means that benefits are experienced earlier and throughout the course of the project, rather than just at the end. Implementing an Agile culture can be difficult, however, and without the right cultural values and structure as a foundation, many organizations tend to return to waterfall processes.

Implementing virtual Agile projects can be even more challenging. The biggest problem most organizations encounter is not adapting their tools and processes to fit a virtual work environment. At Guidehouse, we have a long track record of helping clients implement Agile projects of all sizes, conduct reviews of their current Agile processes, and support virtual Agile engagements. We enable organizations to determine which tools are best for their teams and project needs. Then we help them implement those tools to meet both the project's requirements and changing workplace flexibility norms.

About Guidehouse

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