

Agile Methodology in a Marketing and Communications Team

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Traditional project management involves organising the entire project from the start and relying, in large part, on that organising over the course of the project. This work method is suitable for projects in which predictability is within reach and the project's products does not take unexpected changes from what was originally planned. For projects where the final produce is undefined from the start and matures over the course of the project's time, there is a need for more flexibility and adjustment to ever-changing preconditions.

With that in mind, a type of project management has been developed, which has been named Agile. The purpose of the Agile methodology is to increase flexibility in the regulation of projects and to push for a more rapid revision in the project process and work procedure. Despite its flexibility, Agile still requires planning for the beginning of a project and during its course. Agile is, in fact, a common denominator for a variation of methods in project management in which the work procedure is divided into many smaller independent units, each of which takes into account that which came before it in regards to the project's development. The purpose of this article is to introduce the results of a research study, which was carried out for the purpose of examining how an innovation company incorporates and utilises Agile methodology within its new marketing and communications team.

Research methods and data acquisition

The research method was qualitative, the research topic was clearly defined and the participants were few, although a qualitative method is quite suitable in order to gain an understanding of the experience of a few, examining a small sample in order to gain a deeper understanding of the behaviour and experiences of participants to put forth theories or hypotheses on the event or the conditions that the research focuses on, without there being a specific emphasis placed on possible generalizations on the research topic or the research predictor. A qualitative research method was chosen in order to examine the work procedures, behaviour and communication within a small group of participants and to compare the gathered research data with studies of Agile methodology. The research was conducted within a new innovation company's marketing and communications team in order to see how the Agile methodology was incorporated within teams during their first week (Davíðsdóttir, 2003; Greener, 2008; Merriam, 2009).

Two methods of qualitative research were used during the research study, roughly four work days worth of participant observation on the one hand and open interviews with members of the marketing and communication teams on the other, during the observation period. Both the observations and answers to interview questions were registered in field notes for later analysis. Once the participant observations and interviews go together as a research method along with the data involving the research being looked into, the research topic can be approached from more directions and researchers can gain an even deeper understanding of the research topic.

Participant observations are meant for observing during specific phases or components and can thus be a suitable research method because a foreign party may often have an easier time analysing, for example, processes and communications, which the study participants have difficulty analysing since these factors are becoming normal and belong to their everyday lives. Participant observation was chosen in order to deepen the understanding of the work taking place within the team and the company as a whole and the projects being worked on (Esterberg, 2002; Greener, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Mullhall, 2003). Interviews as a research method are useful in examining the experience, approach, knowledge and views of those being interviewed. During open interviews, the interview itself is informal, the questions are open and the interview resembles a conversation as opposed to a formal interview.

A great deal of information involving the research topic can be achieved with a correctly designed question frame, although that can only happen with appropriate questions aimed closely at the answers, which the researchers are looking for in their research (Greener, 2008; Jónsdóttir, 2003; Merriam, 2009).

The Agile methodology

Agile is a hypernym for a number of tools and methods, which are more flexible than traditional project management methods. The main purpose of the Agile methodology is to increase flexibility in project management and to pave the way for a more rapid revision in the project’s process and work procedure. Agile expects change in procedures and an increased participation of the customer in the process. Uncertainty is to be predicted, and at the same time, the methodology is expected to decrease waste of both time and resources. Despite its flexibility, Agile still requires planning during the beginning of a project and during its course as well.

According to the Agile manifesto in software development, which was written and signed in 2001, the goal of Agile project management is to put:

- Individuals and communication above appliances and equipment;
- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools;
- Working software over comprehensive documentation;
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation;and
- Responding to change over following a plan.

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more (Agile Alliance, 2015; Möller, 2014).

The most utilised tool for Agile is Scrum, which has so far been used for software development, having first appeared around 1990 and is well suited for designing products that possess new technology. The product’s quality is under constant development and adjustment over the project’s shelf life. This method is based upon a close relationship between the project steering committee and the customer and has been used quite a lot for projects revolving around the development of new software. Those involved with Scrum project work are in charge of certain roles in the work procedure, with the roles being the following three: product owner, scrum master and finally the project steering committee, which is responsible for the work it oversees in sprints.

The Scrum methodology places emphasis on communication and individuals rather than on procedures and tools, products that work rather than registrations, co-operation with customers rather than negotiations and reacting to changes as opposed to sticking with previously decided plans. The roles of participants in the Scrum project are clear, where the responsibilities of the project work transfers over to the development teams (ClydeBank Business, 2015; Möller, 2014; Schwaber, 2004; Schwaber & Sutherland, 2014).

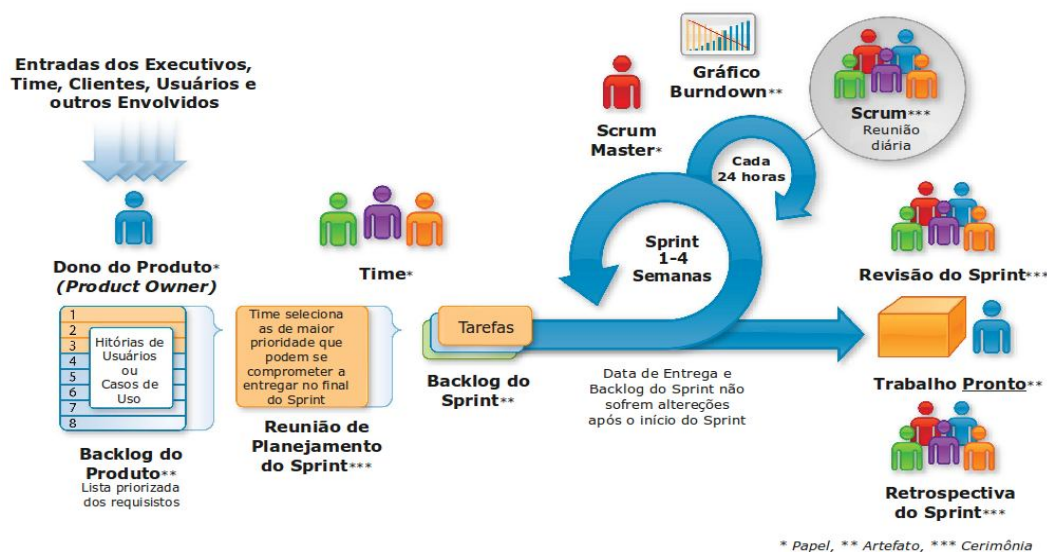


Image 1: Traditional Scrum work procedure (Sathees, 2011).

Another one of Agile's main tools is lean management, which originated in the production of goods as it has been used as a method of control in numerous companies and organisations. Lean management is meant for analysing and shortening work procedures, decreasing the waste of time and resources along with increasing business productivity and profitability. The main tool found within lean management is Kanban, which is known for the so-called Kanban board. The role of Kanban, and its board, is to analyse and make the work procedure more observable, reducing the project segments being worked on at each time, measuring the flow of the work procedure and increasing the flow by detecting any bottlenecks in work procedures. It is common for Scrum and Kanban to be used together in hardware and software development in technology companies, with lean management being used as a method of control in order to improve the business and productivity of companies (Larson & Grey, 2013; Polk, 2011; Serrador & Pinto, 2015; Waldock, 2015).

Agile's tools are becoming increasingly popular among companies and organisations as project management tools, which can, among other things, be used for streamlining the business as well as dividing projects into smaller and more manageable units in order to be able to organise the projects by arranging the project segments in such a way that suits the appropriate project (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2008; Ólafsson, 2012). The Agile tools, Scrum and Kanban, have over the past years been moving outside of hardware and software development and on to other company management projects, and the tools are, for example, being widely used abroad for managing market-related projects. The digital marketing of today is fast and unpredictable and demands quick reactions. For these reasons, the Agile methodology is quite suitable for project management in today's marketing.

The Agile methodology in marketing management

Incorporating Agile into marketing projects eases the adjustment process to the company's market and customers, since the customers and their needs are always in the forefront in market-related projects under Agile control. With increasing communications with customers through digital marketing, Agile makes adjusting to the customer's needs and wishes easier, though the main goal of the marketing stays the same, the company's approach to customers and their needs does change. Agile is not, in fact, something that a company does but rather something a company is. An Agile company is flexible in thinking and action and responds easily to changes, but even though a company utilises the Agile methodology in project management, the methodology itself cannot improve a bad operational basis, lack of knowledge or bad ideas (Accardi-Petersen, 2011; Wright, 2014). The main reasons for companies to incorporate the Agile ideology are, according to Wright (2014):

- Increasing flexibility in order to respond to ever-changing conditions on the market;
- Improving the prioritising of projects;
- Creating an environment where it is possible to work more at the same time as before;
- Encouraging people to say yes to important things and no to what matters less;
- Changing attitudes and stop asking "how do we do things" and asking instead "what is best for customers" by gaining knowledge about their wishes and needs; and
- Increasing the worth of organising, responsibility, transparency and increased communication.

The Agile Marketing Manifesto was signed in 2012 and it states:

- Validated learning over opinions and conventions;
- Customer focused collaboration over silos and hierarchy;
- Adaptive and iterative campaigns instead of Big-Bang campaigns;
- The process of customer discovery over static predictions;
- Flexibility vs. rigid planning;
- Respond to change over following a plan; and
- Many small experiments over a large bet.

(Agile Marketing Manifesto, 2012; Wright, 2014).

Digital marketing

Digital marketing is at its core quite unlike traditional marketing. While traditional marketing is organised, precise, designed from beginning to end and meant for a specific group, digital marketing is fast, flexible, opportunistic and aimed at multiple directions and all manners of target groups. Digital marketing focuses on seizing opportunities when available, forming connections and managing communications with customers at all times.

All customer connections are aimed at being as personal as possible, with the customer even able to affect the product while it is being developed or improved. During the past years, customers have had an increasing number of options available for communications due to great development in communication through the Internet and various social media tools. Digital marketing is, however, not completely unorganised. This marketing is organised to the core; the goal is decided along with how to begin, with the marketing open to changes as required. Marketing needs to be flexible because the Internet's development (i.e., web 2.0) simplifies all communications with customers, and customers belong to parts of the tools being used for marketing and selling the product. The company has to monitor the course of its development in order to respond to the unexpected (Kataria & Hassan, 2014; Oliveira, Santos, Aguiar, & Sousa, 2014; Weller, 2012).

In modern marketing, the customer is an active participant in the marketing in which they both receive and distribute information. Thus, the consumer is a significant influence when it comes to digital marketing. In fact, the consumer's influence on social media is so great that it can prove hard for companies to have any control over their own marketing once it has been published on social media. Thus, consumers can have the final say in how well a company's digital marketing does (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012; Stone & Woodcock, 2014).

Organising market-related projects with Agile

The organising of Agile projects in digital marketing is a different challenge from organising any traditional projects, because the goal is clear, the company has already built a certain career, product or service and it is possible to predict a large amount of the business with great certainty over a long period of time. In numerous market-related Agile projects, the future is uncertain and not set in stone, and for that reason, it is hard to decide on a long-term plan and expect it to stand unchanged throughout the year. Further organising is hard, which is why marketing teams often organise only a few weeks or months ahead of time and, despite everything, happen to change. This is why Agile is so well suited, both within Agile marketing teams, where the methodology revolves around learning from the process and changing it, and simultaneously organises it during the process itself instead of decide everything from the beginning. This does not mean that Agile marketing projects are not organised to some extent from the beginning, although it is important to perform basic research on the target market and to first and foremost examine the needs and expectations the expected customers have towards the product, given that it would become real. The organising of the work changes with the trajectory. The benefits of working on Agile marketing projects are the tools provided by Agile to program managers and the teams working with the conception, which make the work procedure visible and measurable and gives them the right mindset in order to respond to the unexpected events, which take place in the process (Accardi-Petersen, 2011; Conforto & Amaral, 2008; Wright, 2014).

Scrum in market-related projects

When Scrum is used for project management in market-related projects, it is done in a similar manner to product and software development. The projects are divided into project segments and user stories, which are then organised by priority. User stories are then arranged into sprints, which can last anywhere between one week and up to four weeks. The most common sprint length in market-related projects is 1–2 weeks. The user stories are often so large that they need to be worked on in more than one sprint, and they are gathered together into larger stories called EPIC. Examples of EPIC include when a special event or presentation on a new product is being worked on and the planning takes a few months. In that way, EPIC can be a collection of user stories that do not fit into one or two sprints but are meant for longer periods of time, for example as a long-term goal in marketing or sales.

Scrum in market-related projects features the same components as traditional Scrum, such as organisational meetings, daily status meetings, registration of project segments that are waiting and in the end, evaluation of the sprints. The methodology includes the same roles as traditional Scrum, but the roles within the marketing teams can be more flexible. A product owner can, for example, execute project segments within the team, and the administrator can also assume the role of product owner. A Scrum master is not vital to independent teams, and if he is available, then he can tend to more than one team at once. Additionally, it is possible to switch roles within the team as necessary, and this flexibility in marketing teams is very useful in small companies and marketing departments, since they often deal with both shortages and lack of funding (Poolton, Ismail, Reid, & Arokiam, 2006; Wright, 2014).

Marketing teams are often interdisciplinary, i.e. every team member has certain knowledge and experience that benefit the team. The marketing team's sprints often include a variety of projects in each sprint, and teams need to spread their attention between more than one project segment every day. The marketing teams use other ways for measurement than a burndown chart. Market-related projects are not processed in a straight line, which is why other methods are better suited (Fryrear, 2015; Larson & Grey, 2013; Wright, 2014).

Primary flaw

The main flaw with Agile methodology, according to those who have used it, is that it proves hard to keep track of the cost and draw up a budget plan due to the great amount of uncertainty in Agile projects is a lot, both in regards to the time length of projects and the cost because Scrum projects often exceed the budget. Some have taken up mixing together Agile methodology with traditional project management since that can simplify the management of financial affairs in Agile projects.

More often than not, some sort of a budget plan is proposed during the beginning phase, although that plan is under constant revision between sprints during the course of a project. It depends on the size and nature of companies and projects, who is in charge of managing the budget and managing how much to spend for each individual project. A Scrum sprint budget plan is steadily revised between sprints. In some companies, the responsibility of a team's finances lies with the product owner or the team itself while in other companies all finances are in the hands of the company's financial departments. Other companies place their financial management in the hands of their CEO (Larson & Gray, 2013; Möller, 2014; Wright, 2014).

Incorporating Agile methodology

Flexibility is what mainly defines Agile methodology and what makes it expect changes in organising and work. Work procedures and project segments are under constant revision, and in order for Agile methodology to suit the business, the company or teams working under the methodology need to adopt a flexible mindset and the capability of dealing with changes. Knowledge about the methodology and training for its use are fundamental when incorporating Agile, whether that includes work teams, company divisions or organisations, or incorporating Agile into a company as a whole. Formal training in the methodology strengthens teams in working with and using the Agile tools in order to increase flexibility at work, reduce waste of resources and put the customer specifically in the forefront. Formal training needs to be neither time-consuming nor costly, and it is possible to facilitate the incorporation of the methodology even further by choosing simple and inexpensive software to manage the Kanban board, appraise success and complete other indexing. A team-focused working environment that already works by the methodology supported by Agile further supports new teams, but it is important to adapt the methodology for each team, without sacrificing the elements that make the methodology effective. By using simple tools and software, the team can focus on determining the size of project segments, organising sprints and implementing the marketing policy without having to sacrifice valuable time in order to learn how to use complicated software as well (Danielsson, 2013; Larson & Grey, 2013; Möller, 2014; Polk, 2011; Serrador & Pinto, 2015).

It is important in all incorporation methods and changes within companies to ensure that human capital is taken under consideration, that they are aware of what is expected of them and that they understand the reason behind every change, not to mention that their bosses understand, organise and support the procedure and secure the resources necessary for incorporating the methodology, instructions, guidance and tools, which the teams need in order to complete the tasks being worked on with a new methodology. A clear strategy and goal setting are necessary factors in all projects and especially in projects worked on with Agile methodology. If the strategy is not clear enough from the beginning, then it might result with a powerful Agile team working quickly and efficiently but in the wrong direction with an inevitable cost for the company. For this reason, a basic layout of all projects, such as conceptualisation, prioritisation and a plan of the scope of project segments is essential when ensuring good progress in sprints in order for administrators to build a base for the teams to work by. Without them having to compromise the independence of teams by means of rapid management when it comes to processing projects and the solutions to problems (Wright, 2014). The human element, the human capital, in the work of companies and organisations, not to mention when it comes to the building of teams at a workplace, is highly important. The right build-up of work teams and the selection of individuals to work together is the factor that affects the success of teams and the process of their work, particularly when putting together a successive Agile team.

A good organisation of projects, clear project segments and a clear sight towards the goal, whether it being singular projects or the management of a company as a whole, increases the chances for success in management and processing of projects. When a direction has been set, a team chosen and project segments organised, it is important that administrators show their teams trust by allowing teams to work independently on their projects without administrators controlling the teams in their daily tasks. The teams' independence increases their sense of responsibility, and correctly organised teams have all the knowledge and tools they need to work on the tasks at hand and solve all the problems that might arise. For that reason, their specialised knowledge is an important tool for the company, which is why too much control can prevent the team from working at its fullest capacity. It is important to make sure that the team is familiar with the approach being used for project management within the company, which is why training and follow-up should be in place during the entire incorporation process (Barak, Maymon, & Harel, 1999; Morgeson, Reider, & Campion, 2005; Peterson, 2007; Wright, 2014).

Results and Discussion

The company's working environment, where the research was performed, was team-focused; the teams were interdisciplinary, and the technical teams had worked on their projects in sprints since the company was founded. The marketing and communication team was a new one, with new staff and a new role. Many of the company's projects require different knowledge, which is why the teams can change with each sprint and the project segments at hand. A formal incorporation of Agile methodology within the marketing and communication team was short: only two days with participant observation taking place during the team's first working months when it was not a fully formed Agile team. However, most of the factors involving Scrum are in use to some extent with the team being under the guidance of others in the company. The team manages only a very few project segments during each sprint while it is still learning the new methodology and placing the product marketing in motion and is still quite unsure in certain factors of the methodology, as shown in its role in meetings and also in scope and organising project segments. This fact sheds further light on the importance of education and training during the incorporation of the methodology in order for its use to be at full capacity and so that the teams can develop into being active and powerful Agile teams.

Digital marketing is, as stated before, fast, and ever-changing; thus marketing teams need to be flexible in their work. The emphasis, during the beginning of the marketing of a company product, is to create connections with customers; the Agile tools seem to fit well as a means for managing projects in digital marketing as the methodology builds on connections with customers, shows flexibility and expects changes and can thus handle the speed of modern marketing. The team has gotten a decent grasp of their projects involving the product's marketing and the build-up of connections with customers, servicing them as well as introducing the product and selling.

Sprints, both in marketing and communication teams and other company teams, are often two to three weeks long, and in order to accommodate the ever-changing working environment of modern marketing and the diversity of innovation companies, all team sprints are organised in such a way that work on organised project sprints takes place parts of the day and work on other unpredictable project segments are performed alongside the sprints at other times of the day. Fewer project segments are thus organised in team sprints than is usual with Scrum. Sprint project segments of the marketing and communication teams are organised on an electronic Kanban board although outside project segments do not sprint for they can change with short notice and they prove difficult to organise, especially when they require an immediate solution.

Scrum roles within the company marketing and communication team are mostly traditional, such as those described above, yet more flexible. The responsibility for the work lies with the team as a whole, and the Scrum master of the company's team has no authority or responsibility in addition to other team members. The role of the Scrum master of the team is, first and foremost, to be its contact to others within the company and to attend Scrum of Scrums meetings and other meetings connected to the Agile methodology along with other company Scrum masters. The role of product owners is in the hands of the company's administrators. The Scrum and Kanban tools are otherwise used in a traditional manner: nothing from the methodology is sacrificed and the sprints are as successful as before, though fewer project segments are organised in each sprint and sprints are shorter although the Scrum and Kanban tools come in handy for an ever-changing marketing environment and project revisions are more common.

By organising sprints alongside other work, it is possible to ensure that teams have enough time to respond to unexpected factors of the work without the project segments weighing down the team's work for the sprint being worked at. This setup can be quite useful when teams need to attend to a variety of projects, which cannot be worked on at a linear pace, as is the case with most product and software development. Since the work done on the sprint can only be performed during parts of the working day, the company has managed to further increase the flexibility of the Agile methodology. This is how to ensure that teams can solve unexpected projects without disrupting the sprint in any way. The company can, in that manner, utilise its workforce and the knowledge of its team members to its fullest extent instead of viewing the work outside of the sprints as distractions.

With this organising of sprints and division of the working day, it should be, according to researchers, possible to ensure as well as possible that the sprint is being worked at in the correct way, without changing the fundamentals of the methodology, it needs to stop due to unforeseen events and without the methodology's adaptation to the company's needs hold some sort of a dilution to the methodology and this method has proven successful for the company. The adaptation to the Agile methodology being used by the company in managing projects, both within its marketing and communication teams and other teams, can prove especially successful when incorporating the Agile methodology within teams. The division of the work day increases its chances of incorporating Scrum in a relatively simple manner and without great expenditure. It is possible to organise sprints from the beginning so that few project segments and only the most predictable ones are in each sprint, as it can make the work easier for the team while it is figuring out the methodology, work methods and the scope of project segments. It is important to show caution during the incorporation and adjustment of Agile to company projects and business, not to cut out the most important aspects of the methodology during the adjustment process, particularly those components which make the Agile methods more efficient. Wright (2014) warns against it and believes it right to begin in small steps, slowly experimenting and figuring out which components of the methods are convenient each time and which are not. The results of the experiment seem to support and show the importance of starting small with a few project segments and not to complicate the incorporation with complicated tools.

It is important to remember that the incorporation of new methods takes time; it needs to be carefully organised and make sure it is not too hard in the implementing the process. A short period of incorporation of the methodology within the company's marketing and communication teams and little follow-up makes the team quite uncomfortable with the methodology and its roles, as the importance of formal incorporation, its organising, execution and follow-up can not be underestimated. Companies need to be ready to follow-up with the incorporation, training their staff and monitoring the teams while they are coming to grasps with the new methods. When looking at the popularity and spread of Agile in product and software development and to its increased popularity within foreign marketing departments, the researchers believe there to be a significant chance for Agile and the tools, Scrum and Kanban, to quickly spread across Icelandic marketing departments over the next few years, as the success and integration of the methodology becomes clearer. According to the researchers' opinion, the results of this research show the chances of even further adapting Agile into projects outside of product and software development and especially marketing related project, although it is important to make sure the adjustment to projects, teams and the company needs do not reduce the efficiency of the Agile methodology and its tools.

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