



[Print](#)
[Close](#)

Making a Case for Agile Project Management

Bob Weinstein

June 15, 2009

If ever there were an ideal time to make the leap from a traditional to an agile project management approach, it's now. In this tense, uncertain, cost-cutting environment where CIOs are watching their bottom lines like hawks, the concept unfailingly proves successful. It not only delivers consistent, excellent results on time, but often under budget.

Leonardo Mattiazzi, vice president of international business for Ci&T--a Campinas, Brazil-based IT consulting company with offices around the globe--says that there is little question that the agile approach makes sense when companies are compulsively watching their bottom lines. Yet from a big-picture perspective, Mattiazzi insists that agile makes sense regardless of the economic climate. Simply, it translates to a sound, sturdy and unfailingly reliable project management approach. In fact, Ci&T stakes its reputation on the PM methodology.

The IT consulting company has been using agile methodologies for only two years, yet 80 percent of the firm's projects use the agile framework, says Mattiazzi. "By year's end, it will be used for all projects," he says.

There are sound, irrefutable reasons behind this thinking, says this seasoned PM. "Projects using agile methodologies are about 25 percent less expensive than projects using traditional methodologies," Mattiazzi explains. "This number resonates with CIOs. How can they turn their back on that kind of savings?"

Mattiazzi adds that his firm uses agile methodologies within a lean framework. The result is not only reduced project costs, but also faster project turnaround and greater customer satisfaction. He also ranks customer satisfaction as a top priority because it opens the door to new business. "Prior to using agile methodologies, we had an 85 percent project satisfaction rate, but with agile it jumped to 98 percent client satisfaction."

By bundling cost, speed and customer satisfaction, Ci&T delivers value, a priceless commodity in any economy. What is value? For Matiazzi, it's about "delivering the right things at the right speed with the right return."

"We've proven that with 50 percent of a project's budget, we can deliver 83 percent of the total value of an application," Matiazzi adds. "It's not just about getting the requirements and delivering them as fast as possible; we are also showing our clients that we can deliver more with reduced cost. All companies want to see these kinds of results. And this is why agile has enjoyed enormous market success."

Problems with traditional PM approach

There are problems with the traditional project management approach, says Matiazzi and other veteran PMs. Heading the list is a long requirements phase, which often leads to getting lost in a confusing labyrinth of rules, regulations and bureaucracy. A major logjam occurs because decisions have to be made very far in advance, which poses problems if projects conditions change from day to day.

Initially, Matiazzi mistakenly thought agile methodologies work best for projects where requirements are not clearly defined upfront. The thinking was that if requirements were clearly identified early on, then the traditional approach made the most sense. "But we quickly learned that agile methodologies can be applied to any type of project, and if requirements are not clearly spelled out before projects get under way, the projects' success is not threatened," he says. "We learned that agile methodologies work for all projects, regardless of type or size. That's why all the projects we undertake now employ agile methodologies."

Another advantage of agile over traditional PM approaches is that decision-making can be postponed as long as possible, Matiazzi adds. “PMs can still have a long-term plan, but they can decide on specific features as the project progresses--possibly making decisions every four weeks. So it is a much shorter process, because it cuts right to the chase. In the process, PMs can prioritize features to be developed as the project advances. This allows them to focus on the value delivered to clients.”

Summing up, by consistently employing agile methodologies, CIOs and decision-makers have tighter controls over all projects, thus minimizing mistakes. “We can improve speed, value, satisfaction and improve the implementation process,” says Matiazzi.

Eliminates waste

An agile approach wrings the waste out of the development process, according to Ryan Martens, founder and CTO of Rally Software in Boulder, Colo. “From an IT perspective, the simple physics of agile makes it a very easy framework to work with,” he says.

Martens says that organizations like agile because it unfailingly delivers value and eliminates waste. Another plus is that agile works on virtually any project. “It can run on maintenance projects, big-package implementations, you name it,” Martens adds. “As more work is done in the agile space, more is learned, and companies get better at implementation. And as tools and certifications are built around agile, companies become more comfortable with the framework and learn how to get things done using small teams.”

Even though agile methodologies have proven themselves, most PMs surprisingly have not totally endorsed the concept. So says Phil Brock, managing director of the Agile Alliance, a virtual trade organization dedicated to furthering the development and acceptance of agile methodologies. He notes only a relatively small number of companies have adopted agile.

From talking to PMs at conferences all over the globe, Brock has learned that the implementation of agile is not as pervasive as most people think. “Many organizations have pieces of their development teams that are dabbling with agile, but there are fewer success stories than we’d like to think,” says Brock. “Parts of organizations are agile, but it’s rarely organization-wide. Mistakenly, companies think that because they are doing one agile thing, they are agile. But that doesn’t make a company agile.”

Why the reluctance? Companies--especially large ones--are reluctant to embrace change. “Large organizations are laden with bureaucracy,” says Brock. “Acceptance of agile has to start somewhere. It starts at the bottom or at the top and spreads from there.”

But wherever it starts, seeping through an organization usually is a tediously slow process. “That’s why there aren’t many large enterprises that have completely adopted agile,” Brock adds. “But they are getting there slowly. It’s a lot easier and faster for small and midsized companies to make the transition.”

But considering that the agile manifesto was articulated in 2001, progress and inroads are being made every year. As Brock and other agile supporters have said repeatedly, agile is an evolutionary process. But the heartening news is that agile is rallying passionate new supporters who are working hard to make it an essential and timeless tool for PMs worldwide.

When will the world be agile? Brock confesses that he has no answer. “I’d love to say that it will happen in 2011, but I don’t think that we’ll see it,” he adds.

Sooner than you think

Nancy Nee--executive director of project management and business analysis programs at Arlington, Va.-based ESI International--is a lot more optimistic about the widespread acceptance of agile. ESI is a technology consulting company well-known for its white papers and comprehensive IT surveys and studies.

Aside from being a “must-have skill set for IT organizations seeking added flexibility for projects with elusive requirements,” Nee feels agile will have a significant impact on the IT industry. She also has just completed a new agile PM course, which will kick off in the next few weeks. Nee says the course will provide agile’s basic core concepts and an explanation of agile project development. “The focus of the course is not just to teach agile principles, but it’s really more centered on how organizations, management and teams can transition into an agile environment,” she explains.

Nee’s course, and others like it, are particularly relevant for young PMs embarking upon a PM career. “I think it’s especially important for young PMs entering the field to understand what the core PM principles are about,” she says. “Core principles

can come from the PMI and PMBOK, a guide to the project management body of knowledge, and other respected sources that define what project management is all about.”

Yet if young people can embrace and understand how to execute this knowledge, it’s a lot easier to understand how agile can deliver products to the market faster, Nee asserts. “It’s all about satisfying the customers’ demands,” she says. “The projects young PMs will be undertaking will be the result of ever-changing business needs, drivers and requirements. Yet a traditional project delivery approach often means additional reworking of requirements and changes in scope.”

By considering project goals and evaluating whether they permit implementation of the agile approach, new PMs can opt to achieve faster results, adds Nee. They can also be innovative and creative and ensure that products meet customers’ demands. “It also allows them to help customers articulate their requirements in simple, non-technical terms,” she says. “Overall, I’d like features to focus on expectations that achieve goals.”

The strength and durability of agile development from the perspective of young PMs, according to Nee, is that it encourages undertaking complex, creative projects. New organizational initiatives can distill it down to easily achieved delivery of product features for end users so that they can see project results faster. “The result is that organizations can release products a lot faster and earlier in the project cycle.”

All in all, Nee says agile is a powerful vehicle for taking basic concepts and fast-forwarding them out the door. This is why it’s a powerful project framework that will enjoy faster implementation than forecasted by Brock and other experts.

Summing up, Alex Adamopoulos--founder and CEO of Emergn, a sourcing strategy consulting company in Boston--summarizes what he considers irrefutable advantages of the agile methodology:

- **Allows for the 80/20 rule.** Eighty percent of project value is delivered in the first 20 percent of the project. Since working code is delivered iteratively throughout the project, cutting out the fluff after the 80 percent can save IT departments a considerable chunk of money.
- **Lightweight documentation cuts out all the excess paperwork for projects.** Rather than documenting every step of the process, only the essential documentation is required. IT departments can save time and money on the initial project, and then again every time the documentation needs to be updated.
- **Automated, iterative QA testing practices save time.** Test scripts and cases don’t need to be re-created every time through automation, resulting in a much shorter QA test cycle. The automated scripts can then be used years later by PMs who didn’t work on the original project (this is a very big legacy application issue).

Copyright © 2009 gantthead.com All rights reserved.

The URL for this article is:
<http://www.gantthead.com/article.cfm?ID=249805>