



AGILE IN PROFESSIONAL SERVICES INDUSTRY

Professional services industry today is one of the largest employers in a number of developed and developing countries. Essentially, professional services provide assistance to businesses and public sector entities in the form of advice or assistance or perform some tertiary roles. As many other sectors, professional services industry also undergoes changes in its structure, management approach, operational processes, services provision style, etc. And alike other industries it also starts to pay greater attention to trendy project management methodologies – e.g. Agile.

Agile approach, traditionally thought to have originated from IT sphere, also has its roots in other industries, such as lean manufacturing. Managers more often substitute or adjust the traditional Waterfall methods by Agile methodology. This is not surprising, as the basic aim of Agile methodology is to improve productivity, reduce waste and time on operational processes, establish intensive cooperation; all the lucrative productivity gains that each and every manager seeks, no matter in what industry and sphere.

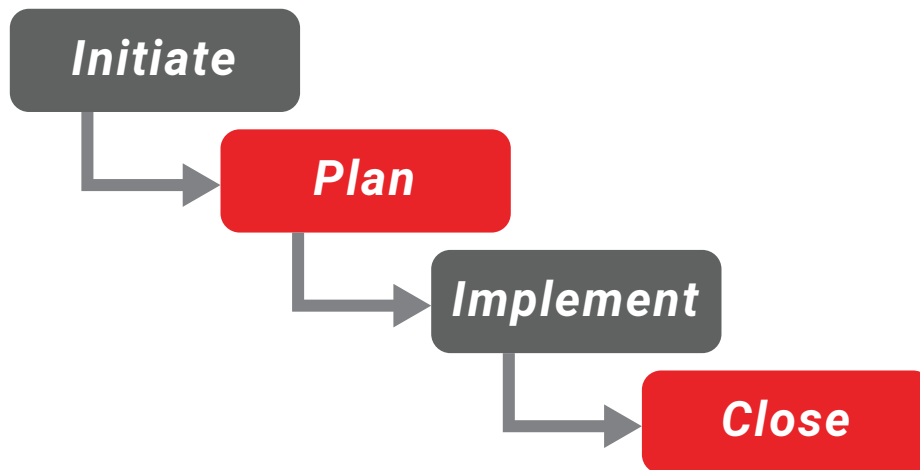
Imagine a football game (either American or European). The ultimate aim of the game is scoring a goal/touchdown. From one side of the field to the other side, the ball can travel through passes of the team members. So basically, the ball will travel through short distances among the team players and ultimately will appear in the net/touchdown zone of the competitor. Agile looks much alike this route the ball takes from one team's side to the other's. The project is created by a number of dots (team players) connected by lines (distance between them). Those dots are deliverables in the end of each iteration, while the lines are project iterations themselves. The fundamentals of Agile are simple as that. So an Agile approach is already widely used in various functions across the companies worldwide and it's starting to be embraced in Armenia too.

Comparison of unused potential, 1000 people



Currently, in most non-IT fields, projects are mainly managed using the Waterfall method. Waterfall methodology, otherwise called traditional, is the widespread understanding of how the project should flow from start to finish. The Waterfall method separates the project to phases and arranges so that one should follow another without major interactions.

Waterfall methodology illustration



Unlike the waterfall method, the essence of Agile methodology is to break down the whole project into pieces and iterations with specific results in the end of each and every iteration. So basically, this will allow to review the short-term results and make necessary adjustments throughout the project. You will frequently set internal (or sometimes even external) deadlines to promote higher engagement and temporarily increase the effectiveness, which is one of the primary goals set by management in almost each company and organization.

So what professional services can use out of Agile practices?

Even if it is too difficult to completely change professional service industry project management from Traditional approach to Agile, there are still several points that can be integrated into this industry reality from Agile frameworks:

- *Putting requirements of the client into user-stories (shorter versions). Breaking down the work to smaller pieces can help better with scheduling and tracing the results, easier implementation of the tasks, and clearly defined priorities for this or that specific requirements. Let's take an example of a project on crafting and installing a corporate performance management system at a client company. It is a complex project that can span a few years and engage multiple elements and stakeholders.*

Thus a manager employing an agile approach can split the project into a number of deliverables, assign a team to work on different parts separately (e.g. review of company documents, conducting diagnostics interviews, analysis of internal processes, detection of operational deficiencies, development of appropriate compensation and motivation scheme, test of the scheme among several departments, etc.) assuming fast development of first drafts (“rapid prototypes”), running then with client and getting quick feedbacks, learning from them and developing next iterations of the deliverables and running the same cycle again. These cycles can be for all parts of the project in parallel (rather than sequence). Such parallel and rapid cycles have extra benefits to the consulting team performance evaluation, since consultants can have very frequent and fast feedbacks and correction cycles instead of traditional annual or project post-completion cycles.

- *Stand-up meetings with team members at the start of each day. Short, clear, and concise discussions about what the team has already done, what is scheduled for today, and what can inhibit the working process for getting desired deliverables.*
- *Retrospective view with the team on the finished projects. What was done well and what was done wrong, what can be done to improve the work in the future, and how the team can get higher productivity and better quality.*
- *Using panels for keeping the user-stories visible for the whole team. Physical maintenance and visualization of the workflow promotes higher engagement and proactive work style.*
- *Increase engagement from the side of the client. More status meetings and intermediate result discussions can be arranged in order to keep the customer connected to the project progress and adjust to his/her specific needs faster.*
- *Foster ongoing collaboration and communication. Periodic discussions and result sharing can increase productivity, faster learning process and remove possible impediments.*
- *Less estimations and more ongoing working process. We lose time on project timeframe and budget estimations, which will probably deviate from the real results notably at the end. It's better to plan and estimate for shorter periods, where fluctuations of the estimated results compared to real baselines are negligible.*
- *Prioritization. In our fast-changing world, prioritization of the tasks is becoming crucial. This can also be done using visual tools, where the priority goals will be placed on top of the project's deliverables table/board.*

Agile approach is not only about changing processes and improving quality and efficiency of the company, it is also about transforming the working culture, stimulating collaboration, promoting innovative thinking and motivating on continuous goal achievement. It is a cornerstone on the company's development path, which can arm up the team with new skills and create an improved mind-set for reaching better results.



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