

Agile TODAY

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE ENTERPRISE INNOVATOR

Volume #2 | SEPTEMBER 2011

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Letter from the editor



Another Agile Australia conference has come and gone and what a great couple of days it was!

It astonishes me to see how the conference has grown over the last three years, and how much the community has developed and matured.

I want to thank our conference sponsors, ThoughtWorks, Agile Academy, DiUS, MIP, Rally Software, SMS MT, IBM, Centrum Systems and salesforce.com for helping to make the conference the huge success it was.

It's clear that the tougher questions, the deeper topics are what we're looking for now. One question that came up quite a bit was about how to take Agile from one small team, to a bigger team or across an enterprise. We heard that scaling Agile is a real frustration for many businesses, and we've covered it in more in depth in AgileTODAY on page 2.

We're also looking at cases where the Agile way hasn't worked, and some reasons why on page 6.

Find out what made BankWest's Tania Broome become an Agile coach on page 12 and rediscover the Agile 'wow' on page 14.

Plus we've got a sexy 16GB tablet to give away to one crafty reader! Check out the details on page 8.

As always, we love hearing your thoughts on the magazine, the Agile Australia conference, and your suggestions and contributions. Please get in touch at agile@slatteryit.com.au to share your ideas.

All the best,

Zhien-U Teoh



Is it possible to do Agile at scale?

By Beverley Head

Managing thousands of IT personnel, legacy applications and international offices can be a real headache for Agile teams. Beverley Head looks at the secret sauce to getting enterprise-scale Agile right.

Ideally Agile teams are small, nimble and co-located – it's always been the secret sauce. The dilemma for enterprise-scale Agile is that those three adjectives rarely apply to big business.

Large organisations can have thousands of IT personnel, often lumbering legacy applications and governance regimes, and are spread all over the world.

As Agile has emerged during the last decade from its “alternative” phase to become a respected mainstream approach to software development, enterprises have grappled with the issue of scaling Agile and even outsourcing or offshoring elements of the Agile development process.

A global survey late last year conducted by Version One found that 29 per cent of respondents worked in organisations running 10 or more Agile teams. However only 10 per cent of respondents had Agile teams operating in more than five locations. The journey to scale is still a work in progress.

Over the last six years Sascha Ragtschaa has conducted what amounts to a field trial of scaling Agile development. Brought into the Computershare fold following an acquisition in 2004, Ragtschaa first set up teams with 5-7 people to start working on Agile projects for the financial services business.

Teams quickly grew to 15, and today Ragtschaa, now the senior development manager for Computershare, has a 210-strong Agile team based in

Melbourne. But the company also has development arms in the US, UK and other countries. In Germany the company has an Agile-only development group of 35 people.

“I have always picked the smaller projects, then grew them bigger in time,” said Ragtschaa. This he said provided the “spark” that demonstrated what could be achieved using an Agile approach. There was however; “Always resistance from other groups” but said that over the last six years Computershare had established a number of international teams using Scrum and Agile.

“We are not 100 per cent Agile, but we're getting more traction,” he said. “We've never mandated it but people are jumping on because it works.”

Sascha Ragtschaa





Dr Alistair Cockburn

“The rules have changed there is a tendency to believe that the larger the rollout the more we need rules and standards, but that leads to more complexity.”

The whole notion of Agile is getting more traction, especially among enterprises which are being forced by the economy and fierce competition to find ways of responding to changing market conditions faster than ever before.

Jean Tabaka is an Agile Coach with Rally Software which operates with a number of large scale Agile development teams and says the Agile approach is breaking out of the IT enclave, saying; “It’s no longer just in engineering, but is used organisationally.” She works with large companies in healthcare, the energy sector, online commerce,

telecommunications and IT, and has one client with 3,000 IT staff, which is now rolling out Agile through the enterprise.

“The rules have changed – there is a tendency to believe that the larger the rollout the more we need rules and standards, but that leads to more complexity.” Agile however is not a

licence for free rein, as Tabaka said Agile at scale demands discipline, just not traditional bureaucracy.

The need for managers of large scale Agile projects to rethink their approach was a theme at the recent Agile Australia conference in Sydney. Dr Alistair Cockburn, co-author of the Agile Manifesto and a keynote speaker said

it was important managers remained mindful not only of the sorts of systems being developed, but the size of the teams being used.

He said that he had seen two person projects become 100 person projects spread across three countries which would fail because management never changed their thinking or strategies from the time when they were running smaller Agile teams.

In large organisations Jean Tabaka said consistency and persistency of the vision was paramount – and that needed to be continually checked and reinforced among the groups. Communication remained key; “The whole notion won’t work without transparency – because we are no longer pushing decisions down.”

Tabaka also said that as Agile teams grew it was more important to pay attention to tooling. “Without automated tooling and constant flow of information Agile will fail,” she warned.

It was also critical that IT management established governance and steering committees which adopted practices consistent with the Agile approach. “You have to know where to put investments, to watch investments and identify what you are getting back.

“We have no choice - we have to look at the systems thinking and design thinking. You need a more varied tool box so that you know how to manage complexity and deal with systemic complexity. When we talk about rigour and discipline you don’t want to go back to the bureaucratic processes, but you do need to have a fierce support for the new processes.”

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Jean Tabaka

Tabaka added that this need for proper support also percolated through to other areas of the business – for example she said it was important that HR policies appreciated and reflected the essentially team nature of an Agile enterprise and established structures that support and reward that. “We are struggling with stuff like that,” she acknowledged.

Computershare’s Sascha Ragtschaa said that as the company had developed scale it had; “Applied quite strict processes. All the team managers had to have Scrum, burn-down charts, retrospectives and we made people accountable for implementing it.

“It’s something I said from the beginning – use Agile, use Scrum, use Extreme Programming – but don’t tell me you’re Agile if you’re not using it.” He said that team leaders had been obliged to provide weekly status updates detailing what had been achieved, what needed to be achieved and what problems were being encountered.

Depending on the situation the company had also called for monthly release cycles or two week sprints with team leaders again required to report their process. Importantly the company has also established a once a year physical meeting so that all the different Agile team members can get together.

Tabaka agreed that there was particular need for rigour in terms of monitoring the use of Agile techniques in larger teams. This was magnified where teams were not co-located.

In those situations she said companies needed to use instant messaging, videoconferencing and telepresence for communications. Alistair Cockburn agreed that it was important to harness

video in geographically separated teams, particularly to allow project sponsors to communicate.

“You can find you are in Chicago working with a team in India. Create a five minute video to send to India. Technology is our friend now. Imagine - the VP of marketing does a video on why this system is important to them.”

Tabaka also recommended groups working with different cultures seek out “trusted advisors” to help navigate diversity issues as “nothing can be assumed about a culture.”

Trusted advisors were essential in creating approaches to “humanely drive out Agile” and get people involved in the process. “We had a team in India where no one would speak up – you can’t take over the decisions as the scrum master. You have to find the questions to develop the trust and make it safe to fail,” she said.

The challenge of managing distributed teams is likely to grow. The Version One survey conducted in late 2010 found that 32 per cent of organisations were already outsourcing some Agile development, and another 13 per cent had plans to follow suit.

Sascha Ragtschaa however is not convinced that geographically separated

Agile teams can ever work as well as a co-located group. “We trialled seven or eight people, two in New York, two in Chicago, and the rest in Melbourne.” It didn’t work as well as he’d hoped.

Ragtschaa said that simple hurdles such as time differences proved major stumbling blocks, especially for people with families who didn’t want to be on a conference call with teams around the world late at night.

“The reality is it doesn’t really work that well. The project will be OK – but you never get the same value out of it,” he said. Computershare’s approach has been to keep global development in Melbourne, and then have regional development out in the different company hubs which run their own scrums, “Then we liaise with them every day or two.”

“You need communications transparency – the teams need to know each other,” he said, adding that the challenges were compounded when people tried to outsource or offshore work to a third party. “People are most effective in one room and together.”

Certainly Agile can and does scale – but it needs to be carefully managed to deliver value similar to that which can be unlocked by small co-located teams.

Agile

FAIL



Nigel Dalton

At first glance the concept of an “Agile Failure” seems a contradiction in terms - Agilists routinely embrace failure as an opportunity to learn and improve. But there are examples of real, rather than oxymoronic, Agile failures. As always the trick is to learn from them.

By Beverley Head

One of the fastest routes to failure is to cherry-pick elements of the Agile approach. Teams which omit a core tenet can quickly see their projects unravel, as Lonely Planet learned.

Lonely Planet had been very comfortable with the Gutenberg paradigm – where a printed book took two years to develop and had a further two years of shelf life once launched. Speaking at the recent Agile Australia conference in Sydney, Nigel Dalton noted; “We had years under the Gutenberg process – but have enjoyed being royally screwed by the Zuckerberg phenomenon over the last two years.”

In the fast-paced world of Facebook and socially networking sites which quickly telegraph what’s cool and what’s not, even the best travel apps can have their shelf life measured in days before the next big thing comes along.

Agile approaches to product development are the only option in a field where flux is quite so extreme. But that doesn’t mean Agile is infallible, especially when elements of it are ignored.

Until recently (when Lonely Planet’s owner the BBC relocated development to London) Dalton ran a large Agile development team for the company. While there were many successes, there were also real failures.

It seemed like a good idea for example to develop a system to allow visitors to Expedia and Hostelworld to pay a small sum and download PDF chapters of Lonely Planet guides. But there was no business sponsor, the “good idea” cost “an awful lot of money to develop,” and in seven months Lonely Planet sold just \$150 worth of PDF chapters of its books.

The company also failed with its Audio Walking Tours of cities. Another cool idea, that even Apple loved, and three guides were quickly developed. When they tanked, instead of quitting the project Lonely Planet thought users might buy more audio tours if the range was bigger, so it built even more of the already failed guides. “It didn’t work,” Dalton admitted; “That was a very sobering lesson for us.”

What the lesson taught Dalton was that; “There is no such thing as product



Martin Kearns

development, there's only customer development." Fields of dreams approaches get short shrift in the Agile world.

The problem was that Dalton had allowed Lonely Planet's team to compromise the Agile principles a little too much. It's what Martin Kearns, national capability lead and scrum coach for SMS MT, would describe as a breach of the "Suck threshold".

Kearns described the suck threshold as the; "Palatability of an Agilist to work within a compromised set of values." While he acknowledged hybrid models can exist – incorporating some Agile, some traditional development, methodologies- Kearns said it's important people understand that it's a transition stage and that once a development team starts to feel any external pressure the temptation will be to fall back on traditional techniques which often result in a failure.

That was what Dalton learned the hard way.

But Kearns cautioned that purists can go too far in the other direction, and



Dr Alistair Cockburn

become obsessed about Agile minutiae rather than being focussed on the outcome. "Agile is a philosophy," he argues. "I'm sick and tired of being told this isn't Agile or that's not Agile – I've even been told that writing down in words is not Agile, or that if you are not using a wiki it's not Agile

"We've stopped being Agile because we have become purists. A lot of Agile teams go wrong because a lack of self-awareness of the idealistic Agilist." Pragmatism can never be sacrificed on the altar of Agile idealism.

As Dr Alistair Cockburn the co-author of the Agile Manifesto and a keynote speaker at the Agile Australia conference noted, he had; "Seen projects tank... because people insisted on using some obscure framework, not because it's right for the project but because it will look good on their resume."

He added that it was important to adapt the approach to the situation being tackled, and remain mindful not only of the sorts of systems being developed, but the size of the teams being used.

How to Avoid Agile Failures

- Identify and deal with people who "participate" in scrums but say nothing.
- Weed out the impact of the team member in a planning meeting or stand-up who always votes in the middle.
- Remember that an Agile team is only as successful as its least committed member.
- Counsel the developer who's a perfectionist who won't share early versions with the group.
- Watch out for passive aggressive traits in team members that could scuttle projects.
- Embrace team diversity and the need for tough conversations.
- Only accept a project sponsor willing to spend 15-25 per cent of their time with the team.
- Ensure your sponsor can make decisions without making phone calls.
- Introduce silence into retrospectives to give people time to think deeper.
- Identify the point of collective responsibility where mistakes are seen as opportunities.
- Create an environment where favours are asked for and offered more frequently.
- Ask during your next retrospective "what are the conversations we are avoiding?"
- Force the team to explicitly state their principles of delivery.

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 4. Check the Agile Australia blog to see if you've won!
- Competition closes 30 September 2011.

Last edition's winner was DzulKiflee Taib, Jetstar; with this caption: "AHA! I was right all along that you are into politics! That explains why your name is tagged along some sort of manifesto!"





Rob Thomsett

Another predictor of failure comes in organisations which insist on waiting for a system to be completed before it is tested or integrated with the main line. Rob Thomsett, director of the Thomsett Company, warned Agilists; “Don’t wait until the system goes dark for a year then come out and do the testing and it doesn’t work.”

According to a panel of ThoughtWorks experts, continuous deployment, while confronting, could reduce the incidence of failure as incremental changes were easier to fix.

Thoughtworks software architect Neal Ford said; “I think not doing continuous delivery is much more risky. Which is risky? One where ‘we managed to get this deployed at 6am on a Saturday morning’ is a really risky proposition. If you are doing magical deployments it will cause massive visible outage.”

ThoughtWorks Chief Scientist Martin Fowler:

“If you’re doing something very rarely then do don’t get better at it. To get better at it you practice.” Hence the need for continuous deployment and continuous practice.

Agile teams were also warned to keep some resources in reserve for the rollout phase – failures can occur not because of a software problem but a systemic failure. As Steve Laurence, a principal Agile consultant at Slice Consulting, reflected: “One company did a huge rollout without any change management or comms team in place after the delivery date.” Naturally it classed as a failure.

There’s a lesson there.

“If you’re doing something very rarely, then you don’t get better at it. To get better at it you practice.”

Martin Fowler



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Agile AUSTRALIA '11

60 seconds

with Tania Broome



“I noticed that the team were getting the job done, solving problems for themselves, in a better way than I could have ever been able to architect myself.”

With experience in the vibrant Agile centres of Europe and the United States, Tania Broome is bringing her knowledge to help Australian companies accelerate their Agile transformation. Tania is currently an Agile Practice Manager at Bankwest, and spoke as a panellist at the Agile Australia 2011 conference.

Everybody starts their Agile journey somewhere. What was your ‘Aha!’ moment?

I started my Agile journey back in 2005 when I was working as a Project Manager at a Digital Media firm. I was a great PM, firm but fair, on top of every detail, and fast heading towards my second burn out. Our principal client had expressed an interest in Agile and I was given a project, a few books, and a keen team, and we were left to figure the rest out for ourselves. Well, at first I hated it! I could not bear the lack of control and the amount of flux that existed in our backlog but soon I noticed that the team were getting the job done, solving problems for themselves, in a better way than I could have ever been able to architect myself. They were happy, our client was thrilled and I was working normal hours. I have never looked back since and often half-joke that Agile saved my life!

What has been your greatest challenge when introducing Agile to an organisation? How did you overcome it?

I have found the greatest challenge in introducing Agile to be the culture change that is needed to support the new way of working. Adopting Agile is just as much about unlearning old behaviours and habits as it is about learning a new framework of delivery tools and techniques. At Bankwest we have seen great success through our grassroots activities of introducing Agile values, principles and techniques for colleagues to adopt and use in their everyday work. We have seen these practices spread virally and it is wonderful to see the values being applied in unexpected ways and places. Culture change takes time, requires persistence and resilience, and is impossible to achieve without the active engagement of leaders across all levels of the organisation.

What is your favourite Agile-related quote?

I’m not sure where I heard this first but I quote it a lot: “Every time a person is

referred to as ‘resource’ an Agile fairy loses their wings”. This is a real pet peeve of mine. In our world a person is an individual craftsman, who brings their own unique set of skills and experience to their team and the problems they solve. Implying that they are a fungible commodity really winds me up.

What is the strangest situation you’ve applied an Agile principle to?

Scrum played a crucial role in the planning of my wedding. I commandeered the spare room for eight months to construct a most impressive card wall that allowed me to visualise our progress at all times. Working through a prioritised backlog in time-boxed iterations helped to keep me sane and in the end we pulled off a fabulous day. I do have to admit that I was working with a pretty small team and most planning sessions only involved one (me) but I do have to give my now-husband every credit for his patience and participation.

If you could have a total career change, what would you be?

I have always fantasised about being on the stage. One of my colleagues is a professional actor turned coach and we often discuss the parallels between great teamwork and a successful theatrical ensemble. Perhaps I could take some of the wisdom from Agile and apply it to an exciting career on Broadway!

What is your favourite thing on your desk right now?

I have a fantastic collection of multi-coloured, multi-shaped post-it notes all over the place. The bright colours make me happy and provide me with a creative outlet (even if they mostly just get used to manage my to-do list). Agile lets me indulge in my stationery fetish and you’ll always find me carrying a set of index cards, sharpies and some coloured dots.



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The WOW Starts NOW

with Craig Smith

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the ‘Agile Manifesto’. This historic document was the culmination of the ideas of 17 passionate guys who got together on a mountain outside of Salt Lake City with the aim of focussing on delivering quality software rather than following mundane process.

This document was not the invention of Agile, as approaches like XP and Scrum were already around at this point, but it was the document that gave us the label ‘Agile’.

In the years since, we have seen the rise and rise of the adoption of Agile methods. However, while its core values and principles have remained the same, many new and improved practices have evolved.

We saw this in June this year when we held the third annual Agile Australia conference in Sydney. It was full of buzz and enthusiasm from the 700-plus attendees and it brought home to me what I appreciate most about being part of the Agile community. The fact that everybody – both your friends and competitors – are willing to share their experiences, good or bad, is something that I am sure would not have happened ten years ago.

On the flipside, one of the criticisms I have heard of late, is that there is no “WOW” in the Agile community anymore.

This got me questioning. Where has all the “WOW” gone?





“We need to bring these innovations out of the shadows and shine a light on them, and not be too quick to dismiss them.”

I think in part, Agile is now seen as having well and truly crossed the chasm into mainstream. However, have we gone so far that have we have actually jumped the shark?

Judging by what I have seen at this and other recent Agile conferences, there is in fact “WOW” happening everywhere. You just have to notice and appreciate it.

These range from small examples like the different ways that people tackle retrospectives or organise their iteration planning, right through to innovative approaches to testing and deployment. We need to bring these innovations out of the shadows and shine a light on them, and not be too quick to dismiss them.

My thoughts are that we need to make sure that people who are still on their Agile journey have some basic practices and approaches to build their Agile foundation – which is a huge “WOW” on its own. For the rest of us who have made the leap, we need to remember the twelfth Agile Manifesto principle:

“At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behaviour accordingly.”

In other words, we need to continually adjust and share our findings, and every now and then we might just come up with a “WOW” moment. That’s how practices like user stories and test driven development were invented.

My challenge to you, reader, is what is your ‘WOW’? Sharing our experiences, good and bad, is what makes the Agile community great. We need you to share your war stories and your improvements on existing processes and practices (and if you do, we welcome you to share it at the Agile Australia 2012 conference!)

To paraphrase Martin Fowler in his closing keynote at Agile Australia 2011: If you say Agile is no longer relevant, then essentially you are saying you are happy to go back to the ways of the past. If you have truly used Agile in your organisation or team, then you would agree there is no going back – and that is the greatest WOW of all.

Craig Smith is an Agile Coach at Suncorp and an advisor to the Agile Australia Conference.



A Retrospective on Personal Performance Reviews

An iteration manager at Suncorp, Jonathan Coleman asks the question, “Is there a better way to do performance reviews?”



“This could be a challenging session to facilitate... How would the group react? Would they be honest?”



Anyone worked in a big corporate before? If so you’ve probably all had a crack at the ‘best practice’ for performance reviews. These have probably included some kind of 360 degree feedback gathering session.

In our company these are usually emailed out as forms for individuals to fill in and return, and the feedback is then distilled and presented back to the person undergoing review. I’ve observed that some people aren’t entirely honest with these forms. Plus they kind of suck to fill in.

As a person undergoing a formal performance review, I looked at this process and thought ‘Yuk!’

I don’t like filling in paperwork about my performance, so why would others? Besides, feedback via written word in a sterile form, distilled and fed back to me may lose some context. A discussion would be more valuable.

I was sharing these thoughts with a colleague – let’s call her Jane – and suggested she hold a retrospective, on herself. I thought about doing this for my own review, and discussed the pros and cons with my leader.

Then Jane came back and asked me if I would facilitate her retrospective! While I was debating the pros and cons, she just got on and booked the retro and invited people to give feedback. Kudos for being proactive!

Initially I was quite nervous. This could be a challenging session to facilitate because Jane would be there. How would the group react? Would they be honest enough to give true feedback? Would they give better feedback, as the conversation would add clarity?

I kept that in the back of my mind, and we ran the retrospective. We focused on “What

Jane did well”, “What Jane could improve”, and “Recommendations for Jane to follow up on”. The group had a time-box to fill out their post-it notes.

We stuck them on the wall under the usual ☺ (smiley face), ☹ (sad face), and an (R) for recommendations, and grouped them. There were groups about soft skills and some about technical skills. This was a tricky thing to do as it was more personal than the usual team performance that’s under review. However, I applaud Jane’s bravery in being present at the meeting to listen for context.

Here’s what I observed: people are happy to give good feedback. There was more “did well” notes than “could improve”. There was some valuable feedback around what could be improved and what was recommended. However, I felt the group was not being entirely honest with what could be improved. Either Jane was really really awesome, or there was discomfort in coming right out and sharing this with Jane in the session.

Still, it was an interesting foray. And checking with Jane, she was happy to have some areas to improve that she wasn’t aware of before.

So, here’s a wrap up. Pros: In this approach, there’s more discussion, so the person receiving feedback gets more context than on sterile paper forms. Cons: It may be harder to elicit full honesty around what could be improved, especially if the person receiving feedback is present.

I think this idea has merit and could be used in conjunction with a performance review. If done well it may also give the team leader a chance to gather feedback from a disparate group of people on a tricky subject like someone’s performance.

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