

Achieving Nimble IM Programs Through Agile Methodology

Successfully test driving the use of agile methodology for IM projects can put organizations on the road to wide-scale adoption that will make them more nimble, innovative, profitable, and satisfying places to work.

Bruce W. Dearstyne, Ph.D.

Information management (IM) programs need to stay dynamic and responsive to shifts in information technology (IT), customer expectations, legal requirements, and other factors. A promising management tool for meeting this challenge is *agile* methodology, in which self-organized, cross-functional teams work iteratively with end users to gather requirements and then design and build new products and services.

Developed years ago to accelerate software development projects (see the sidebar “The Agile Manifesto”), the methodology was soon applied to project management beyond just software initiatives. It reduced the time needed for completing projects, accommodated innovation, and increased success rates. More recently, agile has been adopted by many organizations for getting a broad range of work done.

Agile is showing up particularly in organizations operating in uncertain, ever-changing environments where IT and accelerating digitization are increasing the volume of information and the need to manage it and make it available for use. It is well suited to organizations in which customer engagement and support are essential.



Benefits of Agile Methods

As McKinsey & Company notes in its report *The Five Trademarks of Agile Organizations*, agile is “catching fire.” Organizations using agile methodology achieve greater customer centricity and satisfaction, faster time to market, higher revenue growth, lower costs, and a more engaged workforce, according to McKinsey.

Agile’s hallmarks are flexibility, nimbleness, and speed. It fits well in organizations that are themselves creative, innovative, and dynamic – what Deloitte Consulting calls “the organization of the future,” one that dismisses the “old rules” and follows new operating rules, such as those shown below.

Where Agile Methods Work

As a set of methodologies, rather than a single formulaic approach, agile needs to be adapted to different settings and problems. An organization that is just getting started may opt to apply agile to a small project and then expand into other areas as confidence with the methodology grows. Agile methods, once mastered, can be used repeatedly as they become more and more familiar, eventually becoming part of a program’s standard operating procedure.

According to Bain & Company, agile methods work best under the following conditions, taken verbatim from its report *Agile Innovation*:

- “Customer preferences and solution options change frequently
- Close collaboration with customers; rapid feedback from customers is feasible; customers learn more about what they want as the process progresses
- Problems are complex and solutions are unknown; scope is not clearly defined; product specifications may change; creative breakthroughs and time-to-market are important; interactive, cross-functional collaboration is vital
- Incremental developments have value and can be used by customers; work can be modularized and conducted in rapid, iterative cycles; late changes are manageable
- Interim mistakes provide valuable learning opportunities
- The culture is team-oriented, collaborative, innovative and eager to delegate; employee turnover is relatively low”

How Teams Are Empowered

A flexible, scalable network of teams is at the heart of agile. This requires a management mind-set shift from an assumption that people need to be closely directed and supervised to an assumption that people working in teams, with clear responsibility and authority to get things done, will figure out solutions to problems and

The ‘Agile’ Organization of the Future

Old Rules

Organized for efficiency and effectiveness

Organization viewed as a hierarchy with hierarchical decision rights, structure, and leadership progression

Structure based on business functions with functional leaders and global functional groups

Advancement through promotion upward with many levels to progress through

People “become leaders” through promotion

Lead by direction

Culture ruled by fear of failure and perceptions of others

Rules-based

Roles and job titles clearly defined

Process-based

New Rules

Organized for learning, innovation, and customer impact

Organization viewed as an agile network, empowered by team leaders and fueled by collaboration and knowledge sharing

Structure based on work and projects, with teams focused on products, customers, and services

Advancement through many assignments, diverse experiences, and multifunctional leadership assignments

People “create followers” to grow in influence and authority

Lead by orchestration

Culture of safety, abundance, and importance of risk-taking and innovation

Playbook-based

Teams and responsibilities clearly defined, but roles and job titles change regularly

Project-based

Source: Deloitte Consulting, “The Organization of the Future: Arriving Now”

deliver exceptional results. Teams designated and assembled by a manager in an agile environment are typically small, cross-functional, and largely self-managing.

The manager identifies the issue and objective, but the team leader, sometimes called the “initiative owner,” keeps the team on track and spends a lot of time with the customers (the groups for whom the product or service is being developed), observing their work, asking them about needs, assembling promising ideas, and serving as liaison between them and the team.

The teams typically operate with a high degree of autonomy. They often start out with extensive discussions with customers, asking questions, identifying problems, and, if possible, observing how the customers work with the systems they have in place. The agile team then breaks problems into modules, develops timetables, and gets work done through discussing matters thoroughly, consulting with customers, solving problems, and reconciling internal disagreements through further discussion.

Often, teams hold daily “stand up” meetings to talk things through quickly. They move steadily on their own initiative as opposed to seeking or waiting for detailed direction from the manager. They embrace uncertainty and improvise along the way.

The team stays in touch with the customer, trying out ideas, testing hypotheses, and developing prototypes. It completes working versions of solutions in short cycles called “sprints.”

The emphasis is on quick, efficient, continuous decision-making, based on the philosophy of preferring a high probability of having the right answer now to a 100% probability later. They value adapting to change more than sticking to a detailed plan. Often, what they produce is a “minimally viable product,” which the customer uses and evaluates. The team then uses the customer feedback to improve the product.

Continuous guidance from the customer is essential to the methodology. In some cases, the teams may need to adapt to a customer’s changing requirements and preferences even as the project unfolds. This iterative approach continues until a product that satisfies customer expectations is completed. Sometimes, the final strategy or product is considerably different from what was first envisioned.

How Leaders’ Roles Shift

Program managers’ roles shift in an agile environment. They let go of some direct control. More of the decision making, problem solving, and responsibility for meeting objectives is delegated downward to staff. Management shifts its focus more to the overall system design and to providing guidance and support for responsible, empowered teams.

As Stephen Denning notes in *The Age of Agile*, in an agile environment, “Strategy involves leaders at all levels making decisions based on an assessment of a fluid,

The Agile Manifesto

In 2001, a group of independent-minded software developers defined a new, faster way to develop software. The document, commonly known as *The Agile Manifesto*, is a wellspring of ideas and a framework for the continuing expansion and application of agile methods. It includes four values and 12 principles.

Listed here are key points from the manifesto:

- Value people and interactions over processes and tools.
- Respond to change rather than follow a detailed plan.
- Favor working prototypes over excessive testing and documentation.
- Favor a functional product developed in a timely way over perfection that takes a lot longer.
- Prefer customer collaboration over rigid contracts.
- Accommodate changing requirements throughout the development process.
- Support, trust, and motivate the people involved on the teams. Skilled, motivated team members take ownership, communicate regularly with other team members, and share ideas to deliver quality products.
- Conduct regular post-project reviews and reflections on how to become more effective and keep improving.

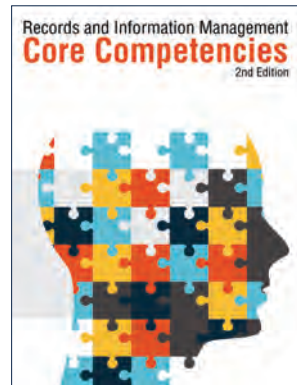
Source: The Agile Alliance, *Manifesto for Agile Software Development*. <https://www.agilealliance.org/agile101/the-agile-manifesto>

constantly evolving situation within an overall strategic design. It accepts that the world is probabilistic, unpredictable, disorderly, and uncertain, and that requires decentralization, spontaneity, informality, loose rein, self-discipline, initiative and cooperation. Acceptable decisions that are made faster focus on harnessing ability at all levels.”

Senior managers freed from micro-management can devote time to higher-level work, including:

- Ensuring that everyone has a shared purpose and vision, expressed in the program’s strategic plan
- Securing adequate resources
- Building commitment and a sense of joint accountability
- Recruiting those with the technical expertise and the desire to work on collaborative teams
- Providing opportunities for professional development in teamwork, agile methods, customer engagement, IT, and cross-functional expertise
- Incentivizing team-oriented behavior, developing recognition programs and compensation policies that reward the group for achievement

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- Selecting opportunities and challenges that are good fits for agile methods, beginning with small projects
- Ensuring that the teams are communicating and cooperating, and that their work is compatible and mutually reinforcing
- Removing impediments
- Making continuous learning part of the program's culture by conducting reviews after each initiative to identify lessons learned
- Ensuring that practices evolve as teams gain experience

How to Apply Agile Methods

Agile methodology is different from what most IM programs are accustomed to using. Some program managers may have reservations about giving teams a high degree of autonomy. The prospect of involving customers almost as partners may seem daunting. But because agile has become a proven methodology, it is worthy of consideration in IM. Consider these strategies for making the transition.

First, get additional information on agile methods by checking out some of the resources listed in the “Read More About It” sidebar on this page. Next, start with a relatively small project as an experiment. Use a flexible approach. In the first few agile projects, the IM program manager may want to monitor things closely or serve as the initiative owner, but with time should delegate responsibility to an appointed initiative owner and the agile team.

Areas of Opportunity

Finally, identify areas of opportunity where agile approaches might be deployed.

Implementing an IG Program

As shown in ARMA's Information Governance Core Concepts graphic on page 31, IM is central to information governance (IG) and, therefore, it has a major role to play in an organization's implementation of an IG program.

ARMA defines *information governance* as “a strategic, cross-disciplinary framework composed of standards, processes, roles, and metrics that hold organizations and individuals accountable for the proper handling of information assets...” but, according to ARMA's technical report *Implementing the Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles*® (TR 30-2017), “there is uncertainty as to how to achieve it.” This seems like the sort of arena where agile methods, carefully deployed, can work well.

In fact, this technical report provides guidelines for using the Information Governance Maturity Model (Maturity Model) to assess the maturity of a department, division, location, or the organization itself. IM program personnel can use these assessments to target appropriate

Read More About It

Books

- Denning, Stephen. *The Age of Agile: How Smart Companies are Transforming the Way Work Gets Done*. New York: AMACOM, 2018.
- Highsmith, Jim. *Agile Project Management: Creating Innovative Products*. New York: Addison-Wesley, 2009.
- Meyer, Pamela. *The Agility Shift: Creating Agile and Effective Leaders, Teams and Organizations*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Moreira, Mario. *The Agile Enterprise: Building and Running Agile Organizations*. New York: APress, 2017.

Online

- Accenture. *Be Agile: Taking the Agile Transformation Journey*. 2017. https://www.accenture.com/t20171211T081641Z_w_/be-en/_acnmedia/PDF-67/Accenture-Taking-The-Agile-Transformation-Journey.pdf.
- Agile Alliance <https://www.agilealliance.org>.
- Bain & Company. *Agile Innovation*. 2016. <http://www.bain.com/publications/articles/agile-innovation.aspx>.
- Booz/Allen/Hamilton. *Agile Playbook*. 2017. https://www.boozallen.com/content/dam/boozallen_site/sig/pdf/publications/agile-playbook.pdf.
- Capgemini Consulting. *Agile Organizations: An Approach for a Successful Journey Towards More Agility in Daily Business*. 2017. https://www.capgemini.com/consulting-de/wp-content/uploads/sites/32/2017/08/cc_agile_organization_pov_20170508.pdf.
- Deloitte Consulting. *The Organization of the Future: Arriving Now*. 2017. <https://www2.deloitte.com/insights/us/en/focus/human-capital-trends/2017/organization-of-the-future.html>.
- Ernst & Young (EY), *Agile Program Management: Success Through Effective Teaming*. [http://www.ey.com/publication/vwluassets/ey-successful-teaming-with-agile-program-management/\\$file/ey-successful-teaming-with-agile-program-management.pdf](http://www.ey.com/publication/vwluassets/ey-successful-teaming-with-agile-program-management/$file/ey-successful-teaming-with-agile-program-management.pdf).
- McKinsey & Company. *The Five Trademarks of Agile Organizations*. 2018. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-five-trademarks-of-agile-organizations>.
- McKinsey & Company. *How to Create an Agile Organization*. 2017. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/how-to-create-an-agile-organization#0>.

maturity achievement levels for each of ARMA's Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles® to bring the department or organization up to the desired levels.

Improving Compliance

Work with the legal department and program managers to assess your compliance with external regulations and internal policies, and determine the capacity for meeting the potential need for records to satisfy legal purposes. Partner with IT to identify solutions to such priority issues as organizing information to meet e-discovery requirements; defining policies for data migration, backups, and security for electronic records; and managing the growing volume of electronic information.

Leveraging Information

Identify an information-centric issue that is impeding the organization's quest for market share, profits, or innovation, and use agile methods to come up with a solution. Possible issues to resolve are the availability of information, the sharing of information among departments, ways to accelerate and streamline the development processes, the protection of intellectual assets, and the retention of accumulated knowledge as older employees retire.

Additionally, an IM program that is transitioning to agile methods should develop systems, policies, and procedures for managing social media use and any new or emerging information tools and applications.

The Road to the Future

Because information is so integral to organizational success, IM staff are well-positioned to help lead their organizations into the future by trialing agile methodology with small IM projects. Success will be dependent on picking the appropriate projects, giving project teams autonomy to collaborate cross-functionally and with customers to solve problems and innovate, aiming for it-



members for their achievements. The organization's pay-off for becoming an "organization of the future" by way of agile methodology will be decreased costs and time to market, increased revenue, and more satisfied employees and customers. **E**



About the Author: Bruce W. Dearstyne, Ph.D., has more than 30 years of experience as a practitioner, consultant, and professor in records management, archives, and related information work. He is the author of numerous articles and several books, including *Managing Records and Information Programs*, published by ARMA International. He can be reached at Dearstyne@verizon.net.

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