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AGILE PROJECT MANAGEMENT

AGILE 101 TO HELP YOU OPTIMIZE YOUR NEXT PROJECT

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Senior Consultants at TPG weigh in on the Agile framework, when it might be right for you and how you can use it to optimize project performance

What is agile project management and when might a company need this framework?

Agile is a software development structure that has now begun to be used for project management. When software was just starting to be developed, developers used the "Waterfall" methodology to create software. Waterfall, however, had major drawbacks because requirements are constantly changing for software

AGILE: Agile is best used for projects that deal with **service-oriented and non-physical deliverables**— for example, code, copywriting, design projects or other projects we do that are primarily transactional. It is particularly effective because it allows for **quick course correction based on stakeholder feedback and empowers the project team to work creatively and efficiently in "sprints"**. Typically, you have a backlog of features or user stories— what the stakeholders are looking for— whether that be in a project as an executive or within the software development process. Stakeholders list what they're looking to be able to achieve, and thus, these initial requirements are gathered, and then prioritized in every "sprint". A sprint could be anywhere between a week to four weeks long. A cadence is established, similar to our weekly steering committee that helps guide our project plan.

WATERFALL: In a Waterfall, however, requirements are gathered and months are spent planning it out before the final product launches. During those months, however, some requirements may have become irrelevant or another solution may already be in place. Your solution may have already depreciated in value.

The main focus of "Waterfall" **is the process of executing on a project rather than the best value that can be added**. It does have its place— it's best used if your project has defined tasks and phases (like construction projects/ ERP implementation). **The project plans are identical and repeatable, and given a well-defined set of inputs, the same outputs are produced consistently.**

AGILE VS. WATERFALL: Agile methodology really focuses on iterative, incremental and adaptive methods, so it's designed for change.

Meanwhile, Waterfall is built around the paradigm of a process. In many Waterfall projects, you have to do something because it's in the plan instead of being able to evaluate whether that action is still needed and whether there's something else that takes higher priority. That ability to shift the plan is hard to come by in Waterfall projects using a traditional model.

So, within that context, Agile better respects the urgency and importance of priorities that are conveyed by the customer user or the stakeholders.

What is a key best practice companies can adopt to keep the team aligned?

One best practice I always recommend is having a **vigilant backlog and documentation around the prioritization decisions that have been made**. You start with a huge backlog of things that need to be done, and then you prioritize with every sprint. However, as you proceed, things may get added, deleted or reprioritized so having that documentation is critical. If you're asked, "Why did we do X?", you need to be able to revisit the parameters and the discussion at the time to give that decision context.

3 PITFALLS TO AVOID WHEN IMPLEMENTING AGILE FRAMEWORKS

Implementing without appropriate experience

For those used to Waterfall methodologies, adjusting to the iterative change that comes with Agile can require a learning curve.

Conceptual understanding of Agile alone does not make for successful implementation. Executives should ensure that someone familiar with the Agile methodology is on board and can guide the team.

Lack of clear milestones and communication

Use user stories appropriately— have a firm grasp of what your stakeholders are looking for, without asking them to solution those things.

Also, to preserve momentum, Scrum leaders should make sure to communicate how effective the team is, especially to executives who aren't familiar with overseeing an Agile project.

Unnecessary recording hampering productivity

Executives struggling with the unknown may sometimes lean into unnecessary recording to mitigate their discomfort.

If they're feeling antsy about not seeing updates, they might ask for additional reports and/ or weekly updates and so forth. Keep in mind, though, that this might cause you to take time away from more useful work.