Project goes back to basics on a common project management term. In this issue, Barbara Roberts of the Agile Business Consortium looks at the fundamentals of agile and agile project management.

Before the 1990s, the IT world was limited by what computers could do. This was less of a problem in a world where stability and minimal change were normal. Solutions were designed by IT experts based on formal specifications and with little or no ongoing business input. As a result, they were all too often delivered late and over budget, and didn’t work.

The Arrival of RAD

In the late 1980s, the arrival of the early PCs started a change. Suddenly, developers could build solutions quickly, working directly to business people, and, after a series of conversations and feedback, actually delivering something that fitted the business requirement. This was termed rapid application development (RAD), and PCs became popular. But it soon became apparent that RAD had underlying issues. Although the focus on rapid delivery and user involvement was a huge improvement on the traditional style of working sometimes referred to as ‘waterfall’, but RAD was not a perfect fit. Control and quality led to a perception that the most (or static business world of the 1990s, 21st-century businesses need to be flexible, adaptable and responsive to change if they are to survive and be successful. Agile is not a binary ‘yes/no’ concept whereby ‘agile’ is good and ‘not-agile’ is bad. In reality, there is a spectrum of choice, ranging from extremely dynamic (sometimes called ‘edge of chaos’) to extremely traditional (heavy bureaucracy and process).

Individuals and interactions over processes and tools

The important thing is to position projects at a point on this spectrum that balances benefits against risks. For example, anyone working in a highly creative space does their best work when there are few rules. Edge of chaos is a wise choice here. By comparison, an organisation creating aircraft equipment cannot afford to work outside stringent rules, as people’s lives are at stake – so formality and control are far more important than extreme creativity. In these examples, each choice is sensible and valid.

Even in the most safety-critical environment, using some agile techniques can add value without introducing risk. Agile should be all about making the right choices.

AGILE PROJECTS

The Agile Business Consortium has always focused on agile in the context of project delivery – unlike many other agile approaches – because it has always considered software in the wider context of business change.

In 2008, it created the project management-focused Agile4SF, which brings together all the elements of a project in an agile context:

- principles (the behaviours);
- people (roles and responsibilities);
- process (the life cycle);
- products (what is produced and where); and
- practices (timeboxing, modelling, iterative development, prioritisation and facilitated workshops).

This is supported by additional information on what agile means for topics such as requirements, estimating, planning, risk and preparing for success. Together with the Consortium’s track record of successful agile in even the most complex regulatory environments, this has helped dispel the misconception that agile is only suitable for SMEs.

AgilePM PRINCIPLES

These principles highlight the types of behaviour needed for delivery of a successful agile project:

- Focus on the business need
- Achieved through active business engagement and ongoing prioritisation
- Deliver on time

Time (and cost and quality) is fixed; features are negotiable (driven by business priorities)

- Collaborate

- Never compromise quality

- Bulk investment from firm foundations

First establish the foundation, then create the solution and the value incrementally

- Develop iteratively

- Use regular feedback to refine the solution

- Communicate continuously and clearly

Conversations and demonstrations as the first choice

- Demonstrate control

This applies to everyone in the team, since they own the plans and the estimates.

You can change your mind whenever you want. Although agile welcomes change, not every change is viable. A good analogy is a building project. The initial stage agrees rough ideas and a rough budget. This is then elaborated into a plan that is submitted for approval. Once the council approves the plans, certain elements are then fixed and cannot be changed lightly – eg footprint (shape and square metres), height (two-storey building/ bungalow) and materials (brick/stone). This forms the foundations of the project, and changes to any of these need serious consideration and, once the build has started, may actually be non-negotiable.

AND FINALLY

Consider DSDM’s wise words: “You can use all agile of some of the time; you can use some agile of all of the time.”

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