

Shades of Agile Gray

By Rodger L. Martin, JD, MBA, BSEE, PMP, PMP-ACP

We live in a digital world that prefers to think in black and white, On or Off, Agile or Plan-Driven. In reality there are more shades of gray. Although Agile is comprised of many more methodologies than just Scrum, most people around me tend to view Agile only in Scrum terms. The Agile artist needs to know when to apply Scrum, Kanban, Extreme Programming, Feature-Driven Development or Test Driven Development, to name just a few.

This article offers an approach when trying to fit the square peg in the round hole. For software development it has been a long hard road to get the culture change to fixed time blocked iterations. Challenges include:

- Frequently there is preparatory work that needs to be done in an enterprise environment before the Agile development team tackles the story.
- Integrated Agile requires the skills of the Business Analyst or the Design Architect to evaluate options before programming starts.
- Sometimes, the time needed for the work effort is more than the length of the sprint and the story is already broken down as much as possible. Reporting a continuous working story does not show business value at the end of each sprint.
- In a large organization, there can be dependencies/interactions with other groups that supersede the time blocked constraints.

The largest cultural issue that goes largely unaddressed in Agile literature is “How to Experiment?” For non-agilists, this is often viewed as “failure.” In reality it is what makes Agile work. For example, did Thomas Edison fail 6,000 times in finding the right material for a filament, or did he did experiment and eliminate 6,000 material candidates? Unfortunately, “Fail” is still a four letter word to most managers (especially those who control the funding sources).

Open Ended Parallel Prototype Sprint

The solution our team developed was to run two sprints simultaneously. One is the published, committed-to Sprint and the other is an open ended parallel sprint for prototyping and experimentation. We needed to track stories where effort was being expended. Stories in the backlog were stories that were not being actively worked. We needed status tracking on stories in work, even if they were not part of the published sprint. There are many status aids in our reporting/status tool, so having another sprint provided the much needed functional status tracking capability.

Also our team is not a 100% dedicated resource and there are different skill sets that are all not needed simultaneously. The team had bandwidth to work on our supplemental stories in the prototype sprint and not be “scooped up” by another project if they were not active. This provided us with a method to track work effort and keep the various development disciplines actively engaged. When a story from the prototype sprint became ready for a published sprint, the effort involved more refactoring than original development. It was much more certain that it would be production ready by the end of the sprint. The end product was more functional and supportable after deployment, and more thoroughly reviewed and tested before deployment.

We adapted by recognizing the many shades of Agile Gray.

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Rodger L. Martin has a broad background in business, law, engineering and Project Management, both plan driven and Agile. He is a retired US Air Force officer with expertise in rockets and National Ranges. His work experiences include government, military, public corporations, small business consulting and high-tech non-profit organizations. For the last 15 years, he has worked on Document Management, Knowledge Management and Process Management/Modeling projects for commercial companies. He acquired his PMP certification in 2007 and his PMP-ACP in 2015. He is also a certified Mediator.

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