

Time to get agile?



“Agile” seems to be a buzz word at the moment and is sometimes touted as *the* approach to ensuring a successful project. But is it the right approach for your project and if so, how do you make sure that it will work for your organisation? Libby Hare, Partner and Project Management expert at independent IS consultants, Adapta Consulting explains.

The traditional or “waterfall” approach to project management is planned around the sequential development of the project deliverables or outcomes, based around stages and generally focused on the overall delivery at the end of the project. This means that often you don’t start to gain benefits from the project until after it has completed. In contrast, agile projects are focused on delivering the products as they are being worked on, in an iterative way, so although the deliverables will be reviewed and potentially amended during the project, you should start to gain the benefits earlier.

Agile’s origins are in software projects and various methodologies have been developed as a result – such as DSDM¹ Atern, Scrum, Lean and Extreme Programming. Although some are more suited to software development than general projects, and some have more rigorous governance, they all aim to deliver project more flexibly with similar characteristics. These include the involvement of the business and end users throughout the project and as part of the project team –as well as collaborating with any external suppliers.

There is a high reliance on and trust in the project teams, and the teams are empowered to an appropriate level so that decisions can be made quickly within short defined timeframes. Equally, collaboration between team members is essential together with good communications and feedback – within the team and with other stakeholders.

Traditional and agile methodologies are both valid so how do you decide which to use? Traditional approaches work well where the project is familiar, requirements are clear and set, and there is a definite sequence – typically office moves, hardware procurement and accounting system implementations. Agile approaches work well where there is an acceptance that the requirements may change during the project, there is a level of uncertainty, and elements of the project could be delivered during the project itself – such as campaigns, CRM implementations and website development.

¹ Dynamic systems development method

If the agile approach is the best fit for your project, then you need to

- Establish good governance, such as a project board or steering group, with clarity over responsibilities and decision-making delegated to the team
- Ensure that there is a good understanding by all those involved in the project about the way the project will be managed; it works well to have a facilitated workshop at the start of the project to agree ways of working , particularly where external suppliers are involved
- Trust the high-level plan showing the different stages, and leave the project team to produce and manage the detailed stage plans
- Encourage collaboration between team members and allow sufficient time for end user involvement at all stages of the project
- Accept that there will be a high level of change during the project and ensure that the project team is sufficiently empowered to make the day-to-day decisions

There are plenty of resources to help you decide which project management approach will work best for your organisation. For Libby's suggestions for further reading around Agile methodologies email her at libby@adaptaconsulting.co.uk