Culture + Talent

Creating the Conditions for Agile

Considerations for a successful Agile journey.

Read 4 minutes

Search the term “Agile work” and you’ll get back nearly 25 million results. These queries return articles that describe Agile work in slightly or dramatically different ways. So, it’s no wonder the term “Agile” can create confusion. To understand Agile, a good place to start is to recognize that Agile implementation is unique to every organization, and while Agile is easy to learn, it is difficult to master. The Agile journey is ongoing and creating the conditions for Agile teams to thrive contributes toward mastery.

Some teams operate in an Agile focused way. These are often software development teams with a process founded in Agile principles and supported by a framework such as Scrum. Others are agile inspired. These are often non-information technology teams influenced by Agile principles or a move toward an agile culture that is fast, innovative and customer focused.

“Because Agile principles and related framework’s operate within a mindset of ongoing learning, you’re always seeking to stretch and improve,” says Dr. Tracy Brower, principal, Steelcase Applied Research + Consulting (ARC). “You’ve never truly arrived. The work is changing continuously which means the process needs to change to support it as well.”

In order to progress effectively when it comes to Agile work, Brower says it’s important to have a firm grip on whether the conditions are right for Agile to take hold. She suggests intentionally managing the conditions to help your team succeed. Brower is a member of the ARC team which works with organizations around the globe interested in advancing their adoptions of Agile.

“Thinking about the holistic work experience is especially important to Agile because Agile requires such a comprehensive mindset,” she says.

When helping to evaluate an organization, ARC surveys leaders and employees to explore current conditions around four main areas:

Culture
Do the cultural norms reinforce Agile principles? Do people behave in a way that suggests Agile principles can be implemented successfully? Some questions include: Is there transparency? Are team members physically present together? Do people feel connected to a broader purpose?

Process
Do elements of the work process contribute to success with Agile? How does your team get things done? Some questions include: Does your team’s process allow for customers to be visible? Are team members dedicated to one thing at a time? Do you take time to reflect and learn when you experiment and iterate?

Tools
Do tools and technology enable the Agile process? For Agile focused work, tools need to move with the process. Some questions to ask: Are your tools equally accessible? Do they help make knowledge visible? Are team members able to shift resources based on needs and demands?

Space
In what ways does space support Agile working? Some questions include: Does the space let teams see each others' work? Is it welcoming to others? Are teams empowered to change the space as their process changes?

In addition to supporting our customers with Agile, Steelcase is also in the midst of an ongoing experiment within its information technology department where people are using the physical environment as a prototype to figure out what best supports different types of Agile work. As researchers and designers begin to gather lessons learned from the coders, analysts and other IT professionals working within the space, key areas guide design directions and map implications to the workplace.

Culture

- **Presence** – To what extent is it necessary that team members are physically present together in order to expedite their work process, or can they work in multiple locations and still get their work done effectively?

Process

- **Team Organization** – Does your team organize by project or by discipline?
  Delivery – Does your team launch and gather feedback in iterative cycles or use a linear process with a clear start and finish, or some unique combination of both?

Tools

- **Information Centrality** – Is information so central to the team's work process that it needs to be visible and accessible all of the time? Or is it known without ongoing visual reminders?

Space

- **Ownership** – Does your team own their space and sit in the same area each day or do you shift between owned and shared, or entirely shared, spaces?
  Flexibility – Is your team free to move their space around or is your team more likely to have people move to different spaces depending on the kind of work they need to do?

The answers to these questions often fall somewhere between one extreme and another. As your team begins to map its current conditions, it can craft a better understanding of how to implement Agile most effectively, and how to create the conditions for the journey. If you're interested in how to create the conditions for Agile work as it relates to culture, process, tools and space, contact our Applied Research + Consulting (ARC) team.

We also encourage you to explore Six Ways to Support Agile Teams to see the initial lessons learned from Steelcase about how the physical environment can encourage Agile principles.