

Agile: Working in New Ways

Seeking greater speed, innovation and customer focus? These lessons learned can inform your efforts.

The relentless quest for speed and innovation has rendered the five-year plan moot, forcing many organizations to think in terms of minutes or weeks instead of longer time horizons. Nowhere is this more evident than in the growing popularity of agile work styles.

THE ORIGINS OF AGILE

When some companies speak of becoming more agile, they are referring to mobility and a desire for more adaptability and responsiveness—giving individuals greater control over where they work. However, agile work inspired by the *Agile Manifesto* is something else. It is a distinct work process that traces its origins to 2001, when a group of tech executives met at a Utah ski resort to brainstorm a better approach to software development. What emerged was a document dubbed the Agile Manifesto, containing a series of values and 12 principles that form the heart of the agile methodology.

THE ESSENCE OF AGILE

An agile work process produces deliverables in brief increments called sprints. Within the sprints, team members focus on prioritized work, limiting the amount of work in process—and striving to work on only one project at a time. Agile prioritizes people, seeks frequent customer feedback, champions face-to-face collaboration, prizes simplicity and welcomes change. Empowered teams are another hallmark. Agile teams are empowered to determine how best to complete their tasks and are expected to regularly evaluate their own performance. All of these tasks are best supported with the right work environment.

Agile is unique to every organization that incorporates it into their work processes. Though still most prevalent in IT, agile practices have migrated into other disciplines as well. Its core principles can translate to many types of teams—product development, marketing, creative groups, HR—any highly collaborative team working on development-oriented projects. Whereas many teams are agile-focused—adopting all sprint ceremonies and behaviors—others might be described as agile-inspired, adopting just certain aspects of agile to become faster, more innovative and increasingly customer-focused.

Born in IT, agile is worth investigating for any team seeking to develop ideas and deliver solutions more quickly. It works by establishing a framework that helps teams churn work in rapid cycles, toggling between intense focus and quick collaboration for the purposes of delivering faster results, greater innovation and more customer focus.

DRIVING THE WORK EXPERIENCE

Through Steelcase research, our own experience with agile and our work with customers, we know agile is not just a new work process but a fundamental change in the entire work experience. Process, culture, tools and space all must play a role in any successful agile implementation.

Think of process and culture as the habits agile workers need—both a new way of working and new patterns of behavior. Meanwhile, tools and space represent the habitat within which these patterns of behavior can flourish. Digital and analog tools, for instance, help teams to collaborate effectively while space enables plenty of choice and control.

These elements—process, culture, tools and space—work together to contribute toward the agile ambitions of speed, innovation, and customer focus.

A COUSIN TO LEAN

Although agile still feels relatively new to some, it shares key principles with lean methodologies that came of age in the 1990s. Whereas lean started in the factory and made white collar inroads with limited success, agile started in IT and is now emerging and influencing other types of knowledge work.

Both agile and lean are characterized by ongoing customer feedback, a commitment to focusing on one activity or project at a time and visual displays to help manage work flow. They also place a premium on empowering teams to direct their own work while always aiming for continuous improvement. In this context, agile isn't so much a new, shiny object as it is the latest incarnation of principles proven to help organizations produce work with greater efficiency.

WHY AGILE IS BIG NOW

Although the Agile Manifesto appeared in 2001, this new way of working seems even more relevant today. Agile's popularity likely stems in part from its focus on doing one thing at a time—an attractive proposition for workers used to constant multi-tasking and overwhelmed by competing priorities.

Agile also taps into the human preference for creativity over redundancy—especially appealing as knowledge work claims an ever-greater share of the economy. Another factor is at play, too. As technology has become ubiquitous, every company is a tech company to some extent—it is only natural that the best IT working practices migrate into other disciplines. The benefits of a “launch to learn” approach and customer feedback that drives continuous improvement in intentional ways are all part of this way of working.

INSIGHTS FOR SUPPORTING AGILE TEAMS

An organization can't just announce its intent to implement agile and expect behavior to change. For the strategy to take hold, it must integrate certain key principles and operate within a work environment that supports them. Here are 10 of the most important:

Make the implicit, explicit. Transparency is a trademark of agile. Team members are expected to make the particulars and progress of their work visible. Consequently, agile environments should provide plenty of vertical and horizontal space for teams to share information visually, as well as multiple connection points to share verbally. The space also needs to accommodate digital, online representation of the work for team members who are working elsewhere.

Tinker, test and trust. If it doesn't work, try, try again. Within agile, every failure is considered a success because of the learning that occurs. A culture that embraces tinkering is a culture that nurtures trust. Agile spaces should offer surfaces, tools and visual displays that support experimentation.

Learn together. Agile teams are present together, leading to mutual learning that develops belonging and commitment. Agile spaces can support this learning by setting the stage for collaboration to happen naturally instead of being scheduled.

Measure, improve, focus. Agile teams welcome frequent customer feedback and constantly measure performance to aid continuous improvement. With this in mind, agile space planners must account for the presence of customers and integrate displays that make it easy to see performance metrics.

Be present. The pace of agile work requires teams to be present together—rubbing shoulders, sharing ideas, building trust. An engaging space that offers plenty of variety and choice—the kind of place people want to be—helps tremendously.

Embrace ambient awareness. Ancillary space near team areas also needs to support people. Display walls in passageways allow team members to mentally offload information or tasks by posting them for future reference. Windows and artwork provide a dose of cognitive relief. Even out-of-the-way interaction areas can spark big ideas.

Shift leadership. Agile asks leaders to behave differently. They must empower their teams to make decisions and direct their own work. At the same time, they must be accessible and ready to lend support when needed. In many agile environments, leaders occupy a central location easily accessible to their teams.

Hold the big picture. Agile teams are most successful when the broader organization understands their work style and how it supports the overall corporate strategy. The workplace can help make this happen by incorporating elements that communicate the agile message.

Treat the tribe as the unit. Agile teams function as a tribe with a shared identity and purpose. Planners can't just focus on accommodating individuals. They must consider the team, always mindful of how members work and move as a unit.

Foster community. Agile team members are most fulfilled when they feel part of a greater community. By working so closely together, they develop common language, knowledge, skills and goals. Their work environment needs to encourage this sense of community by providing space for connecting and celebrating.

LEADING THE AGILE WAY

Agile not only asks teams to embrace a new way of working, but also requires leaders to adapt to a new way of leading.

With agile, leadership shifts from directing to coaching, from telling to empowering and from establishing limits to eliminating roadblocks. Agile leaders get out of the way, checking in on teams rather than checking up, and trusting members to work through problems with little direction. They also encourage risk taking, reassuring teams that experimentation is expected and reinforcing that learning through failure is a positive contribution.

Agile leaders distribute decision making, encouraging team members to accept ever-greater responsibility.

They break down silos of knowledge, focusing instead on cross-training team members to prevent overreliance on individual employees. In addition, they cultivate customer commitment, ensuring that customers are embedded in the process.

Agile leaders must be advocates for agile itself. In many organizations, agile is unfamiliar, so leaders have a role in ensuring all employees are educated on the basics of agile and on how it fits into the culture.

MAKING SPACE FOR AGILE

Agile represents a fundamental cultural shift and people will struggle to grasp the concepts if their work environment looks like business as usual. Besides, there's a direct link between space and culture in that space influences behavior and, over time, behavior defines culture. It is difficult, then, to expect agile success without introducing workplace changes to support it.

Following is a partial list of features common to agile spaces:

Choice and control. Agile team members must be allowed to own their space and must have control over how best to use it.

Intuitive transitions. Agile teams need multiple points for individual and group tasks—and the freedom to shift instantly among them as work requires.

Frequent reconfiguration. There's an axiom among space planners: "Design begins when people move in." This is doubly true in agile environments. Movable desks, tables and display elements allow team members to customize their space as their needs change and their projects progress.

A place to stand. Many agile meetings tend to be so quick people don't bother to sit. Consequently, agile environments typically provide open space for team members to gather around display surfaces and discuss next steps.

Solo work. Though highly collaborative, agile work invariably involves periods of solo or paired work. Agile spaces must include getaways for deep focus.

Welcoming customers. Customers are highly engaged in agile work processes, providing frequent review and feedback. The agile environment needs to include space that welcomes customers into the work stream.

Wellbeing support. The intense pace of agile work means team members need spaces for respite and rejuvenation, often including elements of nature, greenery or outdoor views.

Vertical display space. Visual access to information helps teams test ideas, track progress, maintain focus on goals and stay aligned.

In general, agile requires space planners to shift their thinking— from square feet per person to square feet per team and from designing for density to designing for movement. It also requires a new mindset from facilities management personnel—from maintaining standards to supporting incremental improvements that aid speed and flexibility.

MAKE MEASUREMENT MANDATORY

A measurement strategy should be built into every agile initiative for a few reasons.

First, measurement guides behavior. What gets measured gets done and when results are shared for all to see, people will typically take action to deliver better results. In addition, measurement demonstrates success and the results that prove the strategy works are key to bringing around skeptics and ensuring ongoing support for agile.

Measurement also engages employees. For example, when employees are asked to participate in surveys and focus groups about agile, they tend to be more invested in the strategy because they know their opinions count. This kind of engagement can in turn lead to improvement: Establishing appropriate measures helps organizations see what works and what doesn't, thereby uncovering room for improvement, crucial to any agile undertaking.

One of the best indicators of success with agile is velocity, which is the volume of work an agile team completes within a sprint. It is simple to measure and one of the best indicators of agile success. It usually takes a few sprint cycles for the team to define this measure, and for the metric to improve, but once it does—when new behaviors take hold—results can be dramatic.

It is key to note that velocity, and how a team defines it for themselves will be unique and different across teams. Team velocity should not be compared across teams, it is simply a measure for the team to use internally to gauge, plan and improve their own delivery and performance. Beyond velocity, teams should decide what metrics will be most valuable to track. Ideally, they will be metrics that support overarching organizational goals like customer satisfaction or faster decisions.

A number of qualitative and quantitative methods are available, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, observation—as well as sensors that collect space usage data. Take multiple measurements over time to track progress. Agile makes continuous improvement a priority and a consistent measurement program can confirm your organization is heading in the right direction.

HOW TO SUCCEED WITH AGILE

There are a few [keys for agile success](#) including working together, making a commitment to customers, being transparent and practicing patience.

Alignment is critical: Even if your entire organization isn't adopting agile, everyone should understand and support the concept.

By definition, agile teams focus on one thing at a time.

If other groups make multiple demands on their time, it will be impossible to gain traction.

In addition, internal customers must be immersed in the agile team, and external customers must be prepared to give frequent feedback. Without such deep customer commitment, agile simply isn't agile. Of course, serving customers is best supported with full transparency, and there's nowhere to hide within agile. Agile team members always know exactly what everyone else is doing. They must learn to appreciate the transparency and thrive in an environment that requires uncompromising accountability.

Agile isn't a quick fix, so be patient. It requires new behaviors that will not become second nature overnight. Don't give up prematurely. Seek incremental improvement and trust good results will come.

A JOURNEY, NOT A DESTINATION

Agile works best in applications that depend on creativity and collaboration and lean toward developing new ideas and solutions. Its fit is less perfect for work that includes a lot of known, redundant tasks. Yet many of its key principles—focusing on people over process, responding to change, continuous improvement—translate to every type of work.

Although agile is easy to learn, it is difficult to master. In fact, some might say agile is impossible to master in the sense that it is designed to constantly evolve in response to changing needs. In this way, with agile, you never really arrive. The journey is likely to be far more meaningful, though, when process, culture, tools and space all contribute to the agile work experience.

AGILE AT STEELCASE

A brief case study

Agile work at Steelcase extends to the company's Grand Rapids, Michigan, Global Business Center, where the IT floor recently underwent an overhaul to help hundreds of tech pros adopt agile practices.

The new space not only supports the [transition to agile at Steelcase](#), but also serves as a prototype where agile concepts can be tested.

Work began by identifying what the IT department hoped to achieve—namely, to become a better business partner within Steelcase, more strategic and customer-centered. The Applied Research + Consulting (ARC) group at Steelcase then led a series of activities to determine what behaviors would lead to that goal and how best to measure them.

Designers found inspiration from urban planning. The IT floor gives agile teams four distinct areas: a neighborhood, business district, town square and garden. The neighborhood includes the studio where agile teams do most of their work and a so-called front porch that accommodates customer engagement. The business district offers a variety of formal and informal meeting spaces. The town square includes large meeting areas, social spaces, the leadership nerve center and a café. Finally, the garden serves as a getaway, providing outdoor views and greenery while also supporting heads-down work and quick collaboration.

To give agile the best chance of success, ARC coordinated a comprehensive change management effort to help IT employees and leaders adapt to the cultural shift required for agile work. ARC also engaged in measurement activities to support continued learning and iteration of the solution. These measurement efforts included strategies such as surveys, focus groups and interviews conducted before and after the space change, as well as ongoing analysis of data from seating sensors.

Early results are promising. Velocity improved 36% and metrics concerning privacy, trust, choice, customer engagement and space usage also improved. By every measure, Steelcase IT teams are adopting an agile mindset. ARC continues collecting data to inform future improvements to process, culture, tools and space at Steelcase, as well as to share with clients exploring agile work.

Steelcase

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