Beyond Agile

Bob Marshall considers how Agile the future might look

To my mind the jury's still out on whether Agile software development, using techniques such as Scrum or Kanban, will last the course and become an automatic choice for software development companies and other knowledge-work organisations.

Although lauded when it works well, getting Agile to work well is hard enough that few organisations can manage it. And sustaining that state of high performance, even if once achieved, is also hard enough that few organisations have managed that, either. The challenges and rates of success are more or less on a par with the adoption of Lean principles, for example, in manufacturing companies. I.E. Some 95% of adoptions fail to deliver the anticipated results.

In fact, this uptake and rate of success has little to do with Agile or Lean per se, and all to do with the fundamental shift in how managers and workers see the world of work. Other "high performance" techniques such as Theory of Constraints and Systems Thinking - both of which also require the same kind of fundamental shift - suffer from similar poor success rates, and for the same reasons.

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So, if we ask "what's beyond agile?", my answer is "a world of hurt". The challenge has nothing much to do with the relatively simple adoption of a new methodology or set of tools, and everything to do with a fundamental revolution in the way organisations are managed, led, structured and run. That's gotta hurt.

But "no pain, no gain" as they say. So let's assume for a moment that organisations can accomplish the transformation necessary to take advantage of Agile and Lean. And let's assume that they've acquired sufficient competence in the basics of their adoption that they're looking to move to the next stage. What might that next stage, beyond Agile, look like?

Certain key trends point the way to understanding what that future state of software development might look like:

- **Delivery of customer value**. In particular recognising that most customers' appreciation of value derives from emotional cues, rather than rational ones.
- Flow of value. Economy of production lies in smooth, continuous flow of value (and not in economies of scale, as so often believed).
- **Rapid organisational learning.** In an environment of rapid change, such as technology industries today, the ability to unlearn and relearn quickly is crucial.
- End-to-end perspective: "From concept to cash". Just optimising the software development part of the value pipeline provides little advantage, and many obstacles.
- Limiting work in process. Both Lean and Agile, when done well, have illustrated the advantages of limiting the amount of WIP.

- **People first.** In knowledge-work, where value is create with brains rather than brawn, the state of mind of the folks doing the work is paramount.
- **Hyper-productivity.** Studies have shown that annual increases of productivity of 200, 300, 400 percent are possible. Why then try to grind out 5, 10,15 percent annual improvements?
- **Organisational health.** A great source of commercial advantage, yet ignored by many even though simple, free and available to all.

Combining these trends, the future state of software development might look much like "FlowChain".

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approaches to software and product development, having in common an understanding of the aforementioned trends, and designed to support the organisation-wide product development needs of hyper-productive businesses.

Key aspects of FlowChain include:

- All work flows through the organisation using the same control mechanisms, for both consistency and rapid learning.
- People self-select for work they can do, and "pull" support from a specialist or expert for things they can't.
- Teams form and reform around the flow of work, with team members selfselecting according to the work and their own preferences of who to work with.
- Process improvement is in-band, with improvement work explicitly an integral part of the regular flow of work.
- Cycle time is low (days or hours from concept to cash), process efficiency is high (typically, over 30%).
- Value is delivered in small increments, allowing rapid learning and quick realisation of ROI.
- A flow-based approach removes the need for projects and project teams, and all the dysfunctions inherent therein.
- The "pool" concept develops multi-skilled people with high levels of socialisation, communications saturation and organisational health.

What will "gate" the uptake of these new kinds of hyper-productive approaches? The willingness of organisations - and managers in particular - to innovate in the management domain.

As Deming said:

"It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory."

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