

The Art of Agile Working

Faster and more effective cross-team collaboration remains a top priority for leadership teams. **Emma Carroll** finds out whether 'agile' really does provide the right framework to make it happen



Executives in large organisations encumbered with legacy structures and intransigent silos can find themselves glancing enviously at agile tech start-ups. But they need to do more than look. They must learn from these customer-focused, data-smart challengers if they hope to stay relevant.

Amy Francis, Senior Relationship Manager at Criticaleye, says that larger organisations can find it difficult to adopt agile practices. “In start-ups, flat structures and small teams make agile working easier, but it isn’t always straightforward to adopt in hierarchical businesses with long-established processes.”

She continues: “There is so much data available today that you must be clear about what you really need to know and then set-up in a way that allows your people to access that information and use it to make decisions rapidly.”

Sam Bunting, Global Head of Agile at PA Consulting Group, finds there are five things that agile businesses do well: centre on their customers; speed up time-to-value; adopt a simple organisational design; build to evolve; and, liberate their people.

It begs the question: where to start? **Sam** says an organisation that simply decides it wants to ‘roll out agile’ is starting in the wrong place.

He explains: “You have to ask: ‘Why am I doing this? What is the KPI that needs to move?’ Maybe you’re trying to make better use of your cash balance; improve customer satisfaction; increase your share price – you need to crystallise that and get the entire organisation onboard.”

“In an agile business, you switch the primary organisational unit from vertical to horizontal”

For **Michael Farry**, most recently VP of People at Gusto, the KPI that needed shifting was a customer one. He recounts introducing agile in his former role as People Director at multichannel healthy snack business Graze. “We recognised there was an opportunity to improve a number of core customer metrics, such as average order value. It challenged us to organise our teams in a different way.

“Our shift to agile working started small, with a SWAT team that combined a diverse set of technical, design and analytical skills. Our enlightened CEO said, ‘Here’s a single customer metric we’d like you to move.’ So, we defined the ‘what’, but we let the team define the ‘how.’”

Defining Yourself by Your Customer

One of the aspects that agile businesses are renowned for is their structure: flat, decentralised set-ups that allow for rapid

decision-making. This is often based on a shift to become more customer focused. **Sam** explains: “In an agile business, you switch the primary organisational unit from vertical to horizontal, so that when someone comes to work they feel they live in that customer segment.

“If you ask somebody what they do for a living, they may say, ‘I’m a business analyst.’ But, in an agile organisation they’ll typically lead with a customer: ‘I’m focused on the bank’s mid-market customers, and I work in the credit cards area, and I do business analysis.’ The function is pushed to the back.”

Michael agrees: “It’s moving away from being structured by functions to organising around the customer. You break the customer journey down into its constituent parts: How do we acquire? How do we engage? How do we drive purchases? And then focus teams and units of effort on those particular problems.”

Established businesses will often initially introduce agile into one area, but having multiple ways of working in an organisation can add complexity.

Mark Whitby, who is a NED at businesses including Totalmobile and Candy Mechanics, as well as a Board Mentor at Criticaleye, encountered this at Seagate, the data storage solutions business. Agile was initially introduced into the sales and marketing function, before being more widely rolled out later.

He emphasises that communication, and particularly the sharing of learnings, was key to overcoming a silo-mentality: >



“We took practical examples of what we were doing to be more agile and demonstrated them to other teams that had not yet taken the principles on board,” he says. “We had to continually restate the rationale and why we felt it would be beneficial. It’s easy to underestimate the number of times you need to recommunicate what you’re trying to do, and the outcomes you’re seeking, to make sure that people understand.”

Even in parts of the business where agile has been successfully introduced, there is the risk of the old ways creeping back. “There’s an element of muscle memory which will kick in, even with the best intentions,” **Mark** says. He advocates informal, internal policing, where people hold each other accountable for working in the revised way.

Recruiting and Rewarding for Success

As in all businesses, agile organisations are ultimately dependent on the ability of the people who work in them. **Nicola Pattimore**, Employee Experience Director at City & Guilds Group, has had first-hand experience of implementing agile at both Skandia and Equiniti, and finds that tensions often occur around

FIVE TIPS FOR AGILE

1. Set out your reason for doing it
2. Over-communicate so people understand
3. Establish an appropriate set of KPIs
4. Bring your best people together
5. Stay focused on the customer

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the deployment of resource. “Very often the same people – with valuable experience and capabilities – are wanted by a number of different projects in different business areas, so you get competing demands for them,” she says.

While recruiting is becoming easier as agile becomes more widespread, **Nicola** says that finding people with the right skills remains critical: “When I was partnering with the CIO at Equiniti... we wanted people who were delivery focused, with strong project management skills. They also needed to be commercial and collaborative, good at working at pace and comfortable with ambiguity.”

Nicola finds that pragmatism is an important characteristic, as projects will often get reprioritised and end suddenly. In addition, “people working in an agile environment need resilience as, if there’s limited resource, they’ll often be working on multiple projects at the same time.”

When it comes to rewarding agile behaviour, **Sam** references Dan Pink’s Book, *Drive*, which proposes there are three things that motivate us, none of which are financial. “You need to pay a ‘hygiene’ amount of money, because people have mortgages,” **Sam** says, “but when they’re in work they’re not thinking about the money; they’re thinking about autonomy, mastery and purpose. From a reward point of view, you’re trying to create an environment that reflects that.”

Michael agrees: “People are motivated to want to work in an agile way. It creates working environments where people can learn and create opportunities. Agile working becomes a reward structure in itself.” ■

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Featuring Commentary From:



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