Newsletter Article, Agile Delivery -The Devil is NOT in the Detail, 2 December 2021.

Martin Gosden, SWWE Branch Co-Chair, introduced the webinar on 2nd December, where he welcomed our presenter Bob Willis, Enterprise Agile Coach, IBM EMEA Agile Centre of Competence.

Bob set the scene: the pandemic has reset traditional working patterns, with distributed teams, remote working: a hybrid approach will be the norm going forward. However, in his view face to face working will always have the edge for energy and excitement.

As an agile practitioner of many years' experience Bob is agnostic regarding specific agile tools, frameworks and methods. The specific context determines the most appropriate approach.

The 2018 Chaos Report from the Standish Group found that agile projects had a 42% success rate vs 26% for traditional 'waterfall' approaches. But even so, this is less than 50 % success. Why? Projects need a clear product vision that is linked to an organisation's strategic objectives. This must be made visible, and communicated clearly, with both physical and virtual messages reinforcing it to the team. Goals must also be clear. Bob used a South Park analogy to illustrate this: the gnome underwear thieves. When asked why, the gnomes explained: Phase 1 – collect underwear, Phase 3 – profit! Phase 2 was missed out. They had no idea of what they were going to do to make a profit!

Goals need to be linked to business change, customer impact, change ideas, implementation detail and specification. A useful tool is impact mapping. This links goals with actors, (stakeholders, users, customers), the impact on the actors, such as desired changed behaviour, (which is measurable, e.g. come back more often), and to deliverable options to achieve the desired behaviour changes. An agile approach is to experiment with the deliverable options – has it had the desired impact on behaviours or not? Are we going in the right direction? Should we persevere or pivot? This simplicity is a key principle of the Agile Manifesto.

I want it all! The art of getting the requirement right. The same Chaos report showed that traditional waterfall projects had a 65% change in requirements over the life of the project. The message is clear, don't try and fix your requirements too early – they will change! You need to understand the best way to deliver what the customer thinks they want – as they often don't know what they actually do need. Don't try and future proof, as you cannot know what the future will be.   Feedback from your user/customer is essential and a key component of all agile frameworks. Give them something to test, and see what they think. The sooner we engage, the sooner we can course correct.

How do you Prioritise requirements? Too many projects use 'hippo': Highest Paid Person's Opinion! Be careful to avoid 'pet' projects. A good approach is to have stakeholders agree prioritisation criteria at the start, which will lead to more robust decision making – an example of this is Weighted Shortest Job First (WSJF).

J M Keynes said that it is better to be roughly right than precisely wrong! It must be recognised that estimates are, at best, informed guesses. Agile estimation is based

on the concept of Relative Estimation, where items in a backlog are compared relatively to one another. The key concept here is to not estimate duration directly, but to estimate effort e.g. in Story Points, and derive duration through analysis of historical velocity data and trends. But be aware of the Hawthorne effect: what or how you measure can affect team behaviours in ways you may not expect.

For Agile transformations to be successful, having the right organisational and team structure is important. Silos need to be smashed to encourage cross team working to help each other towards the common goal. The Kanban Method uses tools such as minimising Work In Progress (WIP) to encourage a focus on the team, thus breaking down skill silos.

Be aware of cognitive load; too much to think about at any one time. Matt Skelton's book Team Topologies highlights the need to let teams be productive, to flow, with a focus on delivering value. The Kanban Method again focuses on the concept of "Pull", where work is only started where demand exists and the capability to meet that demand is present - "Stop starting, start finishing!" A Systems Thinking approach allows you to see the whole and not to locally optimise one part of a system at the expense of the whole system.

How do you measure progress in agile project teams? Story points can be problematic, a better approach is a balanced scorecard approach, such as looking at lead times to deliver value to the customer, quality (for example escaped defects), outcomes (e.g. the goals talked about earlier) and broader measures such as team health. The focus should be on trends over time, not snap shots.

To be successful, agile needs strong leadership support, the 'C suite' must be fully on board. Job Terry tweeted the key to agile leadership may be learning to operate gracefully in an environment of frequent unpleasant surprises. Leaders have to accept that change happens. Soul based leadership may offer an insight; be aware of people's humanness, the aliveness in teams, challenges in peoples lives. A person who feels appreciated will always do more than expected.

For Agile to be successful, the right culture is important in an organisation, agile is a mindset, a way of thinking. So how do you foster this? Leaders must walk the talk, they must exhibit the desired behaviours, and be authentic so that teams have trust in them. This is essential for making it stick, John Kotter's 8th step to successful organisational change is embedding this culture in an organisation.

The webinar concluded with a lively and engaging Q&A session.

Martin Gosden   SWWE Branch Co-Chair