Built for Speed

Agile is helping organizations transform the customer experience and fend off startup disrupters.

BY TEGAN JONES

PORTRAITS BY DANIEL BOUD
Upstarts are upstaging industry giants, capitalizing on their ability to respond quickly to market trends. To keep up with the competition—and customer expectations—many organizations are adopting more agile project management approaches.

For example, global conglomerate General Electric uses agile at GE Digital, a subsidiary launched in 2015. The new “digital industrial company,” which is characterized by customer-focused multidisciplinary teams, is expected to be worth US$15 billion by 2020. And in May, Australian bank ANZ announced it would begin using a scaled agile approach by 2018. After the transition, the bank will be structured around small, collaborative teams focused on delivering continuous improvement in the area of customer experience.

The disruption caused by fintech also has inspired more companies in the traditionally conservative finance sector to start moving toward agile, says Larkland Brown, PMI-ACP, delivery manager, SunTrust, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

“Financial services companies now have this realization that if they don’t improve, they’re going to be left behind,” he says.

SunTrust is banking on agile to help deliver a more engaging customer experience: looking for ways to simplify user interfaces and speed up transactions that will work for many different demographics at once. While the transformation could take many years to complete, using an iterative agile approach will make it easier to reassess and revise the plan when customer demands change.

“Agile helps ensure that companies are focused on delivering value faster and more frequently,” says Mr. Brown. “It may mean that something has to be bumped from the original product scope along the way, but in terms of the continuous delivery of value, agile allows the organization to seamlessly pivot towards current need in the marketplace.”

**PRECISION WORK**

Organizations that use agile tend to agree with Mr. Brown. According to VersionOne’s *11th Annual State of Agile Report*, respondents said the ability to manage changing priorities was the top benefit of adopting agile (88 percent). Increased project delivery speed came in close behind (81 percent).

These capabilities are helping Australian telecom giant Telstra face intensifying competition, including from startups in some of its key markets. In the past few years, several new companies have begun offering cheaper and digital-first customer experiences, says Rizwan Khan, PMP, program manager—agile delivery, Telstra, Sydney, Australia.

For instance, one of Telstra’s challengers in the Australian consumer market lets customers select, configure, purchase and connect their phones online in one process.
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“As a company with a long history, Telstra has built up a lot of interconnected systems over time,” he says. “The time is ripe to innovate and improvise.”

Rather than spending months perfecting a full suite of features, Telstra’s IT and digital solutions team now rolls out weekly, monthly and quarterly releases. This allows teams to leverage customer feedback to prioritize the right short-, medium- and long-term features as needs change.

“While we are working on the next set of products, that feedback will feed into the project,” Mr. Khan says. “This way of working shows what needs to be delivered.”

PICK UP THE PACE

This new approach also helps Telstra make progress on complex tasks more quickly. For instance, the organization is working on a multiyear project involving both software and infrastructure elements and multiple stakeholders across business units. Previously, one large project would have been set up to enable the new capabilities, but the new approach offers the opportunity to get to market more quickly and cheaply, Mr. Khan says.

The project was split into multiple phases and releases. “The team identified the minimum marketable product first, thereby limiting the scope of the first phase of the project to a handful of the most essential features that add maximum value. This allowed Telstra to focus on rapid prototype development,” he says. It also enabled the organization to get innovations into customers’ hands faster while reducing the initial capital commitment by 70 percent.
Tech companies using agile approaches in limited ways are now looking to scale them up organization-wide. Zoomdata, which offers a data engine that can process more than 10 billion rows of data in seconds, is moving to an end-to-end agile delivery process to make the company more responsive to customer demands.

“We have a really fantastic roadmap ahead of us, but we have not been satisfied with our delivery speed,” says Akmal Nasimov, PMI-ACP, PMP, director of agile delivery, Zoomdata, Reston, Virginia, USA.

So the company hired Mr. Nasimov in January to head up the company’s full transition to agile. One of the first major changes he made was forming cross-functional teams of developers, quality assurance (QA) people and data engine experts, who are embedded with the product owner.

“Before, product was a completely separate team. It wasn’t really involved in the day-to-day,” he says.

Creating clear ownership speeds up delivery and streamlines decision making. Because each team had its own project priorities in the past, developers often received confusing and conflicting messaging about what tasks took precedence.

Putting the product team in charge—and bringing more stakeholders into the bubble—also has improved the customer experience. By working more closely with customer service staff, the team can get a better understanding about the issues and requests people are calling in about. Since this approach was adopted, the average time it took Zoomdata to resolve customer-facing software bugs decreased by roughly 30 percent, Mr. Nasimov says.

“We’re also rethinking our deployment strategies and QA strategies,” he says. “And this is the first product release after incorporating these new improvements where we’re on track to deliver on time.”

**PEER REVIEW**

The need to deliver targeted projects quickly will only increase as people become more immersed in technology, says Leanne Page, digital project manager at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada.

**5 Steps to Scale Up Agile**

Extending agile beyond IT can help companies transform the customer experience. Here’s how project managers can gain support from skeptics and newcomers.

1. **Earn executive support.** Point to metrics that showcase the value of agile, such as flexibility, transparency and predictability. Once senior leaders embrace the change, it will be easier to get teams on board, says Akmal Nasimov, PMI-ACP, PMP, director of agile delivery, Zoomdata, Reston, Virginia, USA.

2. **Meet teams halfway.** Have one-on-one conversations with team members to identify their pain points. Address their hang-ups and find compromises that will help them slowly change their habits and mindset, Mr. Nasimov says.

3. **Pick your champions.** Find the advocates in your organization and give them tools to convert others, Mr. Nasimov says. Launching communities of practice based on shared interests can help team members put agile to work on their priority problems.

4. **Create a roadmap.** Give teams a clear picture of what the ideal end state looks like—and the milestones they will need to reach along the way, says Larkland Brown, PMI-ACP, delivery manager, SunTrust, Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Tools such as a vision statement, checklists and metrics coupled with frequent collaboration will help teams focus on the behaviors they need to change.

5. **Move slowly.** Don’t try to land a lot of big wins right away. Changing too fast can be stressful for project teams, Mr. Nasimov says. Pick two or three adjustments that will deliver the most ROI—and use that value to argue for bigger shifts in the future.
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“We’re seeing a generational shift in terms of how people want things and when they want them,” she says.

Agile can better support businesses in this new climate. The key, emphasizes Ms. Page, is to help client organizations see the value that comes with working in iterations while continuously improving. This can provide the foundations of a long-lasting project legacy.

There can be a worry that the money that was put in the last iteration was wasted, she says. But if the iterations get “better and better and better, it’s an investment, not a loss.”

Mr. Khan agrees that starting small, delivering incrementally and showing real results helps get everyone on board quickly. And incorporating feedback and managing stakeholder expectations became much easier with this agile way of working, he says. Early in Telstra’s shift to agile, Mr. Khan migrated a few teams to an agile-predictive (waterfall) hybrid model. One success involved allowing teams to select the work that would be completed in each sprint.

This shift empowered the team and reduced inefficiencies, which led to better project performance and attracted interest from other parts of the business. When senior management saw that teams were more efficient—delivering on time and within budget—they welcomed the change and wanted to replicate that across the organization.

“When this happened, slowly and gradually, the hybrid model started to scale,” Mr. Khan says.

Although driving agile adoption isn’t easy, disruption is pushing companies to make the leap, Mr. Nasimov says.

“You understand that unless you change something in the way you do things, disruption will sort of subsume you and you will fall behind,” he says. “You need to bite the bullet, and the realization that you need to do that is more intense when you’re in a disrupted market.” PM