

Is BI Ready for Agile?

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The team that formed to define the Agile Manifesto (<http://www.agilemanifesto.org/>) did so with such intensity of purpose that they identified the core principles of agile software development in only two days. Using the methods that make agile work so well, participants talked, shared, discussed, and collaborated. That these entrepreneurial leaders became of common mind epitomizes their commitment to the whole being stronger than the sum of its individual parts.

As budgets and expectations move in opposing directions, many businesses seek the benefits of agile development in their BI programs and analytic processes. However, they often do so without understanding the commitment they must make. Agile is effective, but it isn't free or easy.

The Agile Manifesto states that agile software development prefers individuals and interactions over processes and tools; working software over comprehensive documentation; customer collaboration over contract negotiation; and responding to change over following a plan. While all these elements are valued, individuals, working software, collaboration, and responding to change are more highly valued.

Can agile methods thrive in a BI environment? At the core of the agile mindset is the belief that being fast and adaptive is more valuable than being planned and methodical. BI programs seek the benefits of agile but are often unprepared for the changes mandated by agile principles. Are BI programs prepared to forsake their attachment to processes, documentation, negotiation, and planning, or are they trying to fly with one foot tethered to the ground? Agile means more than "faster, faster, faster." Doing the same things faster won't bring the necessary changes; doing things differently will.

These are already tense times fraught with uncertainty. To implement agile methods in BI, we now ask for more change; we engender more uncertainty. We ask for radical shifts in people, in processes, and in organizational culture.

Making the transition to agile methodologies will be difficult for those who often perceive their value in terms of delivering projects within scope, on time, and within budget. How do you hit a bull's-eye when you're aiming at a moving target? For agile methods to succeed, BI professionals must change how they think about themselves, how they act toward others, and how they work within their team. The same will be asked of business professionals. BI teams aren't alone in this endeavor--the entire organization must embrace agile methods.

Are BI teams so prepared to make the commitment that they are ready, willing, and able to set aside the comfort of familiar planning, analysis, and development methods? Agile methods take the detailed planning, structure, documentation, and specified deliverables that are the foundation of many successful projects, and turn everything upside down. For those uncomfortable with change and its consequences--changing scope and changing priorities--this adds discomfort in already-unsettling times.

Imagine leaving work one Friday afternoon, satisfied that you have finally finished a stressful project. You have a relaxing weekend with your friends and family. When you arrive at work on Monday, you encounter change--lots of it. The outside of the building is the same, but inside everything is different. Offices and desks are moved. Departments are mixed and matched. You

no longer work on the same floor as IT, but in the accounting office. Standing by your desk is the company CEO welcoming you back to work. If your heart isn't racing now, it should be. This scenario is an exaggeration, but the feelings of excitement and fear are real--excitement about the possibilities and fear of the unknown.

BI professionals have long been advocates of 90-day increments: Get the results to the users quickly in order to continue building momentum and interest in ongoing project funding. However, incremental isn't agile no matter how short the increments or how fast the iterations. The agile difference is in participation and interaction--not just building things quickly, but building the right things quickly. The participative model of agile brings with it the promise of breaking away from the "just another report" syndrome that plagues virtually every BI team.

Agile is exploration. Agile is discovery. Agile is cooperation, collaboration, and making a real difference. The potential is immense, but its implementation demands real change and an organizational act of faith--a deep-seated belief that agile is the right thing to do and that good things will result. Are you ready for agile? Is your BI program ready?

Bibliography

Beck, Kent, et al. [2001]. Manifesto for Agile Software Development.
<http://www.agilemanifesto.org/>