The New (2011)

Definition of Agile

Gebhard Greiter, 2011

Two observations have shown us that we should no longer see the Agile Manifesto as the ultimate definition of Agile:

- In 2006 already John Rusk wrote:

  "Agile development is hard to define, because most people define it by giving examples. For instance they give a specific description of Extreme Programming (XP), instead of defining agile development in general. We've ended up with a widespread misconception that agility is about XP techniques like Pair Programming and Test-Driven Development (TDD). …

  "Defining agility by describing XP is like defining democracy by describing America. Such a "definition" obscures the underlying concept with details of the chosen example."

- At the Gartner BPM Summit (in March 2011) analyst David Norton told us:

  "CIOs should be aware that although agile software development is cheaper in the short term, the costs are often hidden in the long term maintenance. Agile development is often perceived to be a cost-effective solution, as small changes are typically added in to respond to a dynamic environment. This compares with traditional approaches where development may be done on a large scale."

  However, Norton said that because the initial costs are relatively small, CIOs often forget there are costs in the long term:

  "I was speaking to a CIO about agile development and I asked him how he felt about it in his organisation. His response was, 'I wish I had never heard of it'," said Norton. "Agile had solved his problems of productivity and not being responsive to the business, but two years into it and he had hundreds of different solutions that duplicate code and requirements, and his asset reuse had taken a nose dive," he added.

  "This is one of the main things we need to think about – how do we use and leverage the benefits of agile? But also, how does it adapt in the long term?"

  Norton went on to describe some "horrific figures", which suggest that "Only eight per cent of capital and operating agile development costs are in the initial delivery of applications. The remaining 92 per cent is found in maintaining the development over the next 10 to 15 years".

  "This is a something that CIOs need to be aware of and is something we haven't really focused on in the agile community," said Norton.

The problem is that the Agile Manifesto is a far too specific definition of Agile. From now on we better focus on the following (new) definitions:

Software Developer's Definition of Agile:

Agility means to have a process in place that will allow us (and urge us)
to react on changing business requirements as soon as possible:
— Accept that the project's goal is a moving target —

Project Manager's Definition of Agile:

Agile Project Management means to have a process in place
that is to maximize team efficiency,
user satisfaction,
and maintainability of the product independent of specific persons.

Only this can reduce TCO, satisfy the User, and also bring about commercial success for the developers.

Suggestions to re-focus Agile in this sense are Agile Principles 2011 and the SST (Specify, Subcontract, Test) process for software development.

Always keep in Mind:

The Agile methodology is meant to deliver IT projects flexibly, in iterations.
It's meant to involve customers more directly and adapt quickly to their changing needs.
This means the final system only emerges gradually.

It means customers don't pay a fixed price for a complete project:

They pay for a commitment of resources.