Agile project management in public events

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Abstract

Companies in the IT industry today often use agile project management methods to govern their projects. Agile methods value high transparency, self-organizing teams and a process to inspect and adapt. Some of the tools and disciplines from these agile methods are purely aimed at software development. The hypothesis of this paper is that the agile project management methods are suitable in other areas as well. This paper presents preliminary findings and conclusions about using agile project management methods in public event projects.

The case study, carried out with an action research methodology, investigates the Swedish company Galaxen who have organized public music and culture events since 1992. This research indicates that several techniques and principles, originally developed for software programmers, can be adopted also in the area of public events. Time-boxed iterations and visual tools for planning, collaboration and follow up are being used with great success.

Keywords

Agile project management, agile methods, public event projects, project management, scrum

1. Introduction

Methods for Project management originate from large development projects during the cold war within the American military industry (Engwall, 1995). These traditional methods aim at upfront planning for measurement and control for projects which, at the time, had nearly endless resources. The goal was not a specific deadline but to finish as early as possible. Nowadays, most small projects are still managed by the same principles (Nilsson, 2008) even if their preconditions differ a lot from these cold-war projects.

In the IT industry a new project management approach has emerged over the last decade. A number of methods which share common values are called “agile methods”. These methods derived from crisis situations where projects could not meet the deadline, where the time plan failed or where the quality of the delivered project results, unfortunately, was not up to standard (Schwaber, 2004). To save the project from such situations, control has been required with maintained flexibility.

1.1 Event project management

Research studies show difficulties in planning and organizing public events (Getz, 2005). Festivals often fail and Getz (2002) has listed a number of reasons: the weather; lack of corporate sponsorship; overreliance on one source of money; inadequate marketing or promotion; and lack of advance or strategic planning. Many events and festivals are today managed with traditional project management methods (Getz, 2005). Could the choice of project management methods and tools perhaps be the source of the problems with advance and strategic planning?

1.2 Agile project management

The popularity of agile project management methods are growing and research shows an increasing amount of successful projects due to the transition into agile project management (Schatz and Abdelschafi, 2005). In agile project management, project plans are made to be flexible and allow changes even late in the process. Constant demonstration of the project result, follow up and retrospectives allow the project team to repeatedly decide new ways of action for the project. Follow up does not have the purpose of comparing progress with the original plan but instead to show the actual status in the project for better decisions for the future (Schwaber, 2004). Agile methods are characterized by short iterative cycles with actual delivery of project result at the end of every cycle. In software development the deliverables are working code that can be used by the customer.
In traditional project management, milestones are used to control the project. To reach a milestone means that a number of activities should be finished by a certain time. When activities are not finished on time the milestone is not met until later in the project and the project is therefore delayed. To avoid project being late, agile methods use the time-box concept instead. This means that the time and date (the deadline) supersedes the activities meaning that regardless of how many activities have been completed, the project phase ends on a specific date. In management and control terms that mean that the project manager and the sponsor must constantly prioritize and reprioritize what should be done before the accepted deadline. This is, however, nothing new; this is how the media industry (newspapers, TV, radio) has always worked. The time-boxed iteration cycles are often called “sprints” (Schwaber, 2004).

In agile methods ‘the people factor’ (Cockburn and Highsmith, 2001) is strongly emphasized. Instead of controlling thousands of people in really large projects agile methods focus on how to achieve efficiency in small teams. To achieve this, team members need flexibility in their team roles and use a “high bandwidth” (Schwaber, 2004), informal communication. Formal communication is, of course, also important and agile project teams gather once a day in a fifteen minute, time-boxed, meeting called “the daily scrum” with a set agenda. Each team member should respond to three questions: What have you done since our last daily scrum? What are you doing today? Are there any impediments in your way?

Visibility and transparency are important agile values and an agile tool for this is the commonly used “Scrum board” (see Fig 2). The name originates from Scrum, the most used agile method today (Andersson et al (2008)), and consist of a simple sheet on the wall. The sheet (or whiteboard) consists of three columns that show both planning and status for the ongoing iteration. The columns are named “Not started”, “Started” and “Done” and at the start of the iteration, all goals and activities are written on post-it notes and lined up in the “Not started” column prioritized from top to bottom. The team members start working from the top of the board and every team member is responsible for moving the note to the correct column depending on the status of the activity. The Scrum board therefore becomes a transparent “window” for the project since it always shows the current status.

2. The case study company

This case study investigates the Swedish company Galaxen who have organized public music and culture events since 1992. The main event is the annual summer music festival called Arvikafestivalen where 30 000 people attend in a three day event. This is a typical hallmark event (Getz 2005) for Arvika municipality. Galaxen realized the difficulties in planning and organizing public events and started a one year project management program to train future event project managers in 2004. A typical class consists of 15-20 students who train project management skills by managing a number of small real public events during a year. Typically, every student manages 3-5 projects during the year.

The company experienced that traditional project management methods and tools were not entirely helpful in their management training. The tools helped on a high level of management but did not assist the project manager in working with small teams. At first they tried to develop tools on their own until they came across the term “Agile” and realized that the values stated in the agile manifesto (Schwaber, 2004) corresponded with their own beliefs. In 2006 they adopted the ideas of agile project management and implemented some of the agile methods in their management program.

2.1. Method of research

This paper is conducted with an action research method. Since 2006, the authors of this paper have continuously studied and participated as coaches and guest lecturers for the event project management program. The various projects have been examined and studied 10-15 times per year since 2006 until today. Every visit has lasted for a day consisting of observation as well as coaching and lecturing.

3. Managing event projects with agile methods

Since there are many forms of agile values, tools and methods, the event managers have continuously experimented in many ways. Below are the most important tools the project managers’ uses today. The chosen methods and tools have been altered in different amounts during the years but the event managers now experience that the chosen tools are beginning to stabilize in their appearance and use and only smaller enhancements are made every year.

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3.1 Short value-based iterations

Event projects always have a deadline that cannot be negotiated. Many event projects also inherit their deadline due to history of the event itself. Managing a Christmas Day music festival doesn’t leave much space for negotiation, for example. Since this is natural for event project managers, time-boxed iterations (sprints) fits naturally in the way they think and act. The event project managers experience that agile sprint planning has been a helpful way of planning for event projects.

Sprint planning for the event project managers consisted of deciding real and made-up deadlines in order to divide the project into short goal oriented sprints. A made-up deadline is a project internal deadline with a specific goal. The real deadlines were easy to find out, such as the date of the festival, but the made-up deadlines had to be decided for in order to achieve management control of the project. Made-up deadlines are such as when to stop looking for sponsors or when to end advertising.

The length of these sprints varied from a week to a month depending on the size of the project. No matter how large the projects were, sprints never exceeded one month in length in order to be flexible and to have several opportunities for replanning, learning and reflecting. For every sprint the team decided on changes of team members, resources and one or several goals. The information was written down on a large piece of paper titled “Sprint plan” and put on a wall in the project office (Fig 1).

The sprint plan was used instead of a traditional project management Gantt chart. A traditional Gantt chart is normally used for long term planning (PMI 2004). It was used for two purposes: as a planning tool and as a simple form of communication to team members, sponsors and stakeholders. Information on the last line (named “Lessons learned”) was updated after a final meeting at the end of every sprint. In this meeting (the retrospective) changes were also decided for the following sprints.

3.2 Visual planning and follow-up

Once the long term planning of sprints had been made, the project team started using the scrum board with goals and activities of the first sprint (Fig 2).
The goals (large notes) and activities (small notes) were written down on post-it-notes and added on the first column. A difference between typical goals for software development projects and event projects at Galaxen was that goals for event projects often described levels of fulfilment. Instead of “getting three outside sponsors for the music event” goals rather expressed “getting outside sponsoring for 65 percent of total costs”. Therefore, goals were not easily measured until at the very end of the sprint. The activities were easy to see whether they were completed or not (for example “negotiate the sponsorship details with Mr Richard at Volvo”) but the goals often had to be calculated and discussed at the end of every sprint.

The scrum board was a natural meeting place for the team members. When working in event projects the teams members usually needed to do work in different locations so formal meetings were rare. With this board, a natural meeting point was established. The team also decided on a daily meeting time where they conducted their daily scrum meeting to learn about each others progress and problems.

4. Conclusions

These preliminary findings indicate that agile methods work well for public event projects. For strategic planning the overall sprint plan has been used successfully. The agile values of short time-boxed iterations which makes it possible to make quick changes has worked very well in these event projects where deadlines where crucial. The need for detailed planning has been solved by using an agile visual tool (the scrum board). Apart from being a good visual support for planning it has also helped collaboration in the team. Together with the daily scrum meeting, the board has been used for gathering people, understanding status and making quick decisions for the future.

We cannot prove that the agile project management methods and tools have been the definitive reason for successful outcome of these projects. Other factors, such as the personality types of these project management students, could have been reasons for success of the event projects completed over the years. However, success rate of the projects has increased over the years as more and more agile methodology has been implemented in the training program. Further studies need to be conducted in order to verify the increasing success rate of these public event projects.

5. References


