Implementing a Collaborative Working Environment Using Agile: the LexisNexis Experience

Abstract: This article by Karen Waldron describes the experiences of LexisNexis in implementing Agile as a framework in product development and across the organisation. It discusses the principles of Agile, the aims of LexisNexis of greater collaboration, quicker delivery of value to customers and continuous improvement, the main activities introduced, and the benefits experienced at LexisNexis as a result. It also discusses the applicability of Agile as a framework outside of software development, as the goals are common to most organisations, and sets out the view that incorporating simple agile activities into current working practices can have incremental and short term benefit for most teams.

Keywords: ways of working; agile working

INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

LexisNexis has recently been engaged in a major undertaking to implement an agile framework of working practices throughout the organisation. This is a continuation of a journey that we as a company have been on over the last several years, as we increasingly focus on placing insight from customers at the heart of product development. We also look for ways to deliver new products and enhancements quicker and in a way that is more responsive to customer needs. The escalation of the pace and scale of this process over the last few years has involved changes to working practices across departments in the UK and globally with benefits that go beyond software development. These include increased collaboration, shared goals, visible progress towards results, continuous improvement and delivery of improved services quicker to customers. As with all large change programmes, altering working practices involves challenges both for the organisation and for the individuals involved. However, at Lexis Nexis we are already seeing different ways of working deliver real benefits to the business and to our customers.

WHAT DOES AGILE WORKING MEAN?

'Agile' working follows the Agile Manifesto[1], created in 2001 by a group of seventeen software development methodologists with and the aim of creating a lighter, less process-heavy and more efficient way of building software. It is expressed in the Agile Manifesto through four core values, further described in 12 principles[2]

The values of Agile state that while all of the included elements are important we should value some more than others, specifically:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- Working software over comprehensive documentation
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- Responding to change over following a plan

These collectively describe a collaborative, iterative way of working that has benefits when applied outside of software development to more general working practices as the goals of efficiency, delivery of value and continuous improvement are those shared by most organisations. A focus on individuals and the way they work together effectively can yield results in improved productivity, employee engagement and knowledge sharing. Agile is first and foremost about working together towards a clear, shared goal. Similarly, implementing activities that put the customer or client squarely at the heart of day-to-day work ensures that teams have a clear view of what they are trying to build or deliver and why. Successful companies invest significant time and effort in working with their customers and gaining insights from frequent and meaningful interactions to understand their world and their needs.

One of the advantages of working practices which reflect Agile values and principles is that they help to set up an organisation in an optimum way to respond to change. Successful businesses can react and respond

quickly to changes in their market, technology or the needs of their customers. Being more dynamic and nimble can make the difference in turning that response into services delivering value to clients more quickly.

IMPLEMENTING AGILE PRACTICES WITHIN LEXISNEXIS

The challenge for LexisNexis was how to realise these benefits by implementing a more agile approach across the business. At a very high level, this means having a top down approach, with a major investment from the company involving significant time and commitment to change across the whole organisation. While the principles of Agile were developed with software development in mind, in reality the product teams work closely with departments across the UK business and globally and the principles are equally applicable to areas outside of pure software development. In particular we have undertaken Agile transformation projects within our content teams which has seen many benefits including shared priorities, increased visibility of progress and results, quicker implementation of content enhancements and improved forward planning with product teams. Indeed, one of the areas we focused on was breaking down structural barriers within the organisation in order to have colleagues from across teams, departments and even global offices working together on a day to day basis.

Agile principles encourage close collaboration between team members, and trust in those closest to the project and closest to the customers, stating in particular:

> 'Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.'

> 'Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.'

> 'The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation'.

Agile places importance on co-location of teams, face to face meetings, frequent interaction, quick decision making, visual representations of work, continuous review of feedback and iterative improvement. In practice, for the individuals involved in these teams, we have introduced a range of activities. Some examples are briefly described below:

Project boards: Kanban[3] boards, typically comprised of sticky post-it notes on whiteboards, provide the teams with clear visual representations of their project with future, current and 'done' work. It helps the team have a clear view of the status of the work and provides a focus for team discussions. It is also a very effective way of displaying progress.

Daily stand up meetings: short meetings, where the team members get together to update on progress, discuss what they are doing that day and identify any blockers or impediments preventing progress so that these can be removed or mitigated.

Regular retrospectives: meetings in which the team can discuss what went well and what can be improved, building in incremental and continuous improvement to the process.

Planning meetings: for larger programmes of work involving several teams, large workshop-style meetings held at regular intervals with all teams, restating the vision, revisiting the longer term roadmap and identifying priorities and understanding dependencies across teams and projects.

These types of team activity can be incorporated easily into existing working practices without the large scale commitment and investment that a significant cultural transformation entails. Encouraging dialogue, collaboration and regular reviews has obvious benefits in terms of effective team performance. Making work and progress towards visible targets helps to foster a shared sense of purpose.

Another aspect of Agile thinking is the concept of putting the customer at the heart of the team's work. Understanding that this is crucial to the development of great products and services, at LexisNexis over a number of years we have built up an extensive programme of customer discovery that encourages our employees to get out of the office and listen to our users describe what they do and their experiences of doing it and to bring that insight back to the development teams. The best services are built around knowing what customers (or clients) are trying to achieve and helping them to do that. As a product development approach, Agile brings a framework that builds in a frequent insight gathering, testing and feedback loop that allows us to test ideas and developments during the build, and to fail fast or adapt if they are not optimal at getting customers to a desired outcome. We also create customer personas that are visible and available to the teams at all times, so that they never lose sight of the people for whom we are building or enhancing our products. Again, this approach has obvious benefits outside of software development, as a constant focus on the client or customer (internal or external) and what they are trying to achieve with regular engagement and testing of ideas, can only improve the service provided to those clients.

CHANGING THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Our transformation to Agile working practices has involved re-thinking our physical working environments. Agile involves more ongoing collaboration and teamwork, with cross functional teams working together on projects. In our product development world, in practice this

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means product managers working day-by-day and side-by-side with technical development teams, user experience professionals, content experts, product owners who manage the backlog of work and project managers. There is also a need for breakout space, collaborative working areas and sufficient wall space or whiteboards for displaying information and customer personas.

We began the process by gathering the needs of the individuals in the agile space by compiling activity logs of the types and duration of different activities during the working day, and the equipment and facilities required to optimise those activities. For example, how much time is spent on conference calls, on systems or documents requiring desks with multiple monitors, having discussions or informal meetings, concentrating on assimilating information or creating content? Are these activities constant throughout the day or do they vary over the course of a day or between days? The result was a more flexible space, with different types of seating and more informal break out areas, and 'villages' of desks for cross functional teams working together on specific projects, with more general hot-desking and informal seating for those who work across projects or simply need somewhere to work for shorter durations between meetings. We also maximised the usable wall space and supplemented this with mobile whiteboards to allow for more visual displays of project work. In accordance with the agile approach, we also periodically review and implement changes to the working space with feedback collected on how things could work better with a view to evolving and improving the physical environment.

THE CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING AGILE PRACTICES

It is fair to say that the LexisNexis experience of moving to more agile development has involved challenges, both for the organisation and for the individuals involved. As with any large scale change programme involving new working practices, there is a period of adjustment. Change is difficult and takes time to embed within an organisation. Some individuals can find new ways of working uncomfortable. Agile environments are often noisier, dynamic and involve physical interaction and more visual representations, all of which do not suit everyone's preferences. It is essential that business leaders support and motivate team members through the adjustment and are sensitive to the needs of different types of employees. The creation of quieter spaces or areas outside of the agile workspace can help, and we have found using experienced Agile coaches valuable to guide existing team members through the changes, as well as bringing in new team members with extensive Agile experience to lead by example. The commitment of the organisation to provide suitable and repeated training and support for those involved in Agile development is crucial to the success of embedding the approach

although of course many of the principles and activities can be adopted by teams outside of software development without training being required.

At team level, there are challenges around balancing the creation of high performing cross functional project teams working day to day, while retaining the idea of belonging to a structural team or functional unit (for example, product management), essential for engagement with others performing the same role, information sharing and learning from the experience of others. Finding time for teams to 'reconnect', share experiences and learn from others is important. There are also challenges in working in a global team and collaborating across borders and time zones. Frequent communication is essential, and video conferencing and instant messaging can be useful in these instances. Again, frequent and regular assessment of what is working well and what can be improved helps to address any issues and find improvements that evolve how the teams interact over time.

AGILE PRACTICES PRODUCE REAL BUSINESS BENEFITS

While recognising the challenges of introducing new working practices, we also are finding considerable benefits of moving towards a more open, collaborative way of working. It is important not to embark upon change for change's sake, but to have a view of what the organisation is aiming to achieve. At LexisNexis, we believe that a more agile approach enables us to build better services that ultimately better serve our customers' needs. By harnessing the collective creativity, experience and talent of our teams when they work together, through early and iterative development of working products and frequent, insightful customer interactions, we are seeing faster, more continual development of products that have been tested and refined during the build process. We have taken our customer engagement programme, already built up over previous years, to even higher levels not only in ensuring that we are spending time listening to the people who use our products telling us about their world and what they do, but also through regular testing and adjustment of products and services during development.

We are also seeing benefits in employee engagement, with those involved in collaborative teams feeling motivated and empowered with the ability to input directly into delivering valuable solutions to clients. As one of our product managers states '*The ability to quickly effect change is really empowering and furthermore an agile structure allows you to maintain the focus on the customer*'. There is an energy created by Agile environments that provides momentum, and sharing in a clear vision and goal promotes a sense of purpose.

This is also a worthwhile journey for the individuals concerned. As one of our customer insights team describes:

'*Changing from fixed, traditional office practices to an Agile environment requires everyone to adapt their mindset, and going from detailed planning to 'just get started', from long emails to quick productive conversations (whether in person or via the internet) affects every minute of the working day. Although it's hard work for those of us who are detail oriented, and trained to adhere to rules and procedure, it brings rewards on a daily basis. We get things done much quicker, and the team are more relaxed. Trusting each other more means we also identify and share problems earlier, and work together more comfortably to solve them.*'

Key in implementing more agile working is in finding the right flavour or variation of Agile, either in terms of the type of Agile development system to implement in its entirety, or finding the right level and combination of activities that can be used to enhance current working practices. Even introducing some simple Agile steps can have a benefit in improving collaboration between colleagues, and encouraging a culture of continuous improvement, for example by supplementing team meetings with regular interactive review sessions to review recent work and identify and prioritise areas for improvement, or having a short daily get together to directly discuss the work currently in progress.

The best businesses are those which can respond to change. The most significant benefit of introducing agile practices is that it can make an organisation more nimble and therefore quicker to react to changes in their markets, and better able to deliver resulting value services to clients. So, in summary, changing a business environment and working practices can be challenging both for the organization and the individuals concerned, but is worthwhile and can result in real and measurable benefits as well as superior services and products.

Footnotes

[1] http://agilemanifesto.org/
[2] http://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html
[3] Kanban is a framework and structure for organising current and future work – see for example Anderson, David J. (April 2010). *Kanban: Successful Evolutionary Change for Your Technology Business.* Blue Hole Press. ISBN 0-9845214-0-2.

Biography

Karen Waldron is Director of Product Development at Lexis Nexis. Specialising in customer-centric product development, for nearly 20 years she has been at the forefront of the development of new products and services across three different technology platforms including *Banking Law Direct, Lexis Nexis Butterworths (now Lexis Library), Lexis PSL, Tolley Library, Tolley Guidance* and the mobile applications *On The Case* and *Halsbury's Legal Terms.*