

# Executive Summary

## Exposing and Overcoming the Dirty Secrets of Agile Development

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Agile development methods are proving to be a highly effective approach to delivering high-quality software and systems that delight their consumers. Agile continues to be successfully applied across domains including mission-critical, internal systems, external products, database systems, and business intelligence (BI) applications. While agile's values, principles, and practices are largely based on common sense, they are not necessarily as easy to adopt and implement as they appear. In the accompanying *Executive Report*, we draw upon our collective experience in leading agile projects to divulge some dirty little secrets and give you concrete advice on how to avoid the pitfalls of agile projects. This report has special relevance for those seeking to engage agile approaches on what some consider nonstandard applications of agile, especially in the BI community.

### PRECURSORS TO AGILITY

One of the most important principles of an agile project is *frequently delivering* working software. The following five key precursors to the successful delivery of frequent working software are common to all agile projects: solid, stable development tools; an agile development infrastructure; agile workmanship; an agile product architecture; and customer commitment.

### AGILE'S DIRTY LITTLE SECRETS

These ideas lead us to some dirty little secrets of the agile approach:

- Sure, we deliver working software throughout the project, but the “working” software in the early part of the project is likely to be pretty darn simplistic.
- Agile teams take several iterations to become efficient. Once a team is operating efficiently, it can be pretty reliably productive, but *only* when the precursors and other practices that this team has elected to adopt have occurred.

What can be especially maddening for managers watching their teams in the early stages of adopting agile practices is how variable the productivity (as measured by the delivered functionality) can really be. This leads to arguably the most important element of agile methods: more than any other method, agile methods require the wisdom that comes from experience.

### THE PERILS OF CUSTOMER COLLABORATION

Customer collaboration is a core value in each of the agile development methods. The entire customer community is often a large and diverse population with conflicting requirements and priorities. Customers often do not know what to expect or have misguided expectations about their role in the agile project community. Effective customer collaboration includes:

- **Clearly identifying your customers.** The customer community includes more than just end users of your product.

- **Processing the voice of the customer.** Use product managers and filter and prioritize customer feedback.
- **Carefully selecting your customers.** Select the smallest number of customers to partner with while ensuring that they represent the majority of your total customer base.
- **Calling them “codevelopment partners.”** This helps differentiate the agile collaborative relationship from a more traditional provider-to-customer relationship.

### THE TEDIUM OF TRANSFER

Companies seeking to “go agile” benefit greatly from the expertise and experience of agile consultants. Skills transfer should be the aim of any agile consultant so that the company can sustain its agile practices long after the consultant is gone. Our skills transfer model includes four activity domains. The core activity domains, “building the right thing” and “building the right way,” must be conducted in the context of two additional activity domains. The first, “transition best practices,” captures our goal as external agents to bring the practices of agile into the organization. This is tempered by the context of “integrate into client,” in which the specific practices that we advocate must be tailored to meet the specific needs of the client, otherwise they may be immediately rejected as too foreign once we leave the scene.

This model attempts to address several of the demands facing organizations that hire consultants to help them adopt agile or organizations that outsource one or more aspects of the development. It also sheds light on why many organizations adopting agile are often dissatisfied with the agile practices that exist today. Specifically, most agile practices focus on development, but organizations need equal help in product management. As a result, we have found that our projects run more effectively when we introduce two kinds of coaches, each

supporting the client organization in key ways.

### BI AS A CASE STUDY

In the report, we present a case study of one project in a series of projects designed to create a BI platform. We provide a history of the successes and failures we’ve experienced together during the past 18 months and show how the previously discussed items — precursors to agility, agile’s dirty secrets, and customer collaboration — strongly predicted subsequent success.

### CONCLUSIONS

The experiences described in our project case study have enabled us to modify and refine our agile BI principles and practices. We believe that these refinements are also applicable to general agile software development. We are experiencing greater success by doing the following:

- **Engaging a prerequisite confirmation analysis.** Evaluate your project variables against the agile precursors to ensure that your project is starting off on the right foot.
- **Letting the agile experts prioritize.** While the entire project community should be involved in agile prioritization and planning, agile experts should guide this process.
- **Establishing an effective customer-developer relationship.** Good codevelopment partners understand that their active participation in the relationship is rewarded by their wishes and requirements being more effectively met. In exchange, good agile teams treat codevelopment partners like vital members of the project team.
- **Training customers.** Just as developers must be properly trained to become agile, other project community members require training to understand their roles, responsibilities, and commitments.

- **Practicing agility in communication.** This means that communication is just enough to be effective but is frequent, always with a purpose, and of high value.



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