3 SOLUTIONS
FOR YOUR OFFSHORE PROBLEM

As distributed projects become the norm, Agile methods can help them run smoothly.

BY JESSE FEWELL, CST, PMP

The honeymoon is over. Looking to deliver more while spending less, just about every large company has engaged in distributed offshore projects over the last several years. But organizations are discovering that outsourcing carries more pain than was promised. More project managers are suffering from quality issues, language gaps and woefully unmet expectations. So what can we do? Here are some ways that Agile can help you overcome some of the side effects of running offshore projects:

1. Stop emailing and start collaborating.

Agile project management places a strong emphasis on collaborative colocated communication. Using written English can sometimes mitigate language issues, but email takes too long, and large documents can be stale the moment they're sent. Instead, we need to augment project communications with modern online collaboration tools such as Google Docs, instant messaging, discussion boards and Skype. Some teams have always-on webcams so each side can see what's happening on the other.

You can't have successful projects without some kind of interaction. If time zones make that inconvenient, share the pain, with each worksite taking a turn after-hours. In short, work hard to communicate in real time. You'll develop stronger collaboration, which will yield greater understanding and more innovative results.

2. Get bad news early.

A mentor once told me, "Never surprise your boss." Similarly, a good project manager wants bad news as early as possible. One of the greatest pain points for distributed projects is unmet expectations. Sponsors can spend significant time and money generating rigorous requirements, wait a year to see any output and then receive a single large deliverable that simply misses the mark. If iterative-incremental delivery is a good risk-management practice for local projects, then it's absolutely vital for distributed projects.

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reveal problems and opportunities earlier in the game. If it reveals a slew of defects, the sponsor can reprioritize debugging over adding new features. If an incremental deliverable is built to off-target specs, the sponsor still has the opportunity to swap some of the pending features for the needed refinements.

3. Waste some money.

The most successful teams build an additional 1 to 2 percent into their budgets for micro investments that yield high strategic value. One example would be sponsoring some advanced technical training for team leads at the offshore site. Even if you have to use your own budget, investing in better engineering practices can dramatically reduce the quality risk on your deliverables. Many executives may yell at you for spending "unnecessary funds"— but US$10,000 out of a US$1 million budget is a small price to pay for project success.

Projects are hard enough as it is without adding the extra pain of coordinating teams across cultures, countries and continents. But as global projects become more the rule than the exception, the modern project manager needs to be vigilant in improving communication, quality and satisfaction. Agile can help achieve that. PM

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