Applying the Agile Process to SNHU Travel

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Throughout the transition to the scrum-agile approach many roles have changed their workflow to help the team succeed and perform in a more productive, iterative way. First we introduced a product owner who ensured product goals were set, the backlog was stocked with items that would help achieve the goal, and collected feedback from users and much more. A few weeks ago, I interviewed some SNHU travel customers and was able to get some feedback. We used their feedback to create some user stories, such as a top five destination list or price limit/date preference setting. Moreover, the product owner’s main role is more than just getting feedback and managing the backlog, it is mainly to “maximize the value the product creates for the users, customers, and for the business”(Scrum Alliance, 2021). Next, we have the scrum master. The scrum master ensures that the team is following the principles of agile. Some of the responsibilities include running morning meetings, establishing estimation methods for the project, and acting as an agile coach for the team. The scrum master must command a good understanding in all aspects of the team so they can be an effective coach. A competent scrum master should be able to help developers understand backlog items, and work with business analysts as well as external stakeholders. One thing our scrum master at SNHU travel did was facilitate daily standups by having everyone on the team answer the three questions: what did you do yesterday? What will you do today? Are there any impediments in your way? Lastly, the development team is a major part of scrum so applying agile principles to them is essential. Development teams can contain a lot of different members depending on the project, including UX designers, solutions architects, developers, database engineers, testers, etc.

However, the SNHU travel development team only consisted of developers and testers. When we created our development team, we wanted to ensure that our team would be small enough so there wouldn’t be any communication issues and large enough so that we could reach our sprint goals. SNHU travel decided to implement the two-pizza rule: the pizza rule says your team should be the size it would take to eat 2 large pizzas, ideally between 6-10 people. The more people we have on a team, the more “links” there are. Links are used “to describe the social interconnectedness of group members” (Director Point, 2022). These links are possible connections with social media, politics, etc and can lower the effectiveness of a team. The primary roles of developers on our team was to attend the daily standup and complete items off the backlog to help reach the sprint goals. While testers helped ensure that user story processes were clear and concise, no bugs were found in the code. Testers contribute to the whole team's work through working with the product owner to redefine user stories, or working with developers to create better processes for user stories (JCommerce, 2021).

One of the user stories that we developed was to create a price limit and a date preference option. Throughout the agile process we were able to identify the requirements from stakeholders, create this user story, create test procedures for this user story, and evaluate it at the end of the sprint.

The iterative scrum-agile approach is a great way to create a product that doesn’t have set-in-stone outcomes. The product is always fluid; it can always change based on changing requirements and input from different stakeholders. One major SNHU travel user story had changed direction after it was completed. This was to have the top 5 destinations listed in a scrolling up/down view so the customers can choose their favorite vacation. After receiving some feedback from different stakeholders, we found that the customers would much rather have a slideshow style display of the top 5 vacations. Due to the nature of agile, we were able to identify this key component of SNHU travel website before it even launched to production and were able to update it to something that would better fit the customer needs and wants.

A key component of a successful agile team is communication. SNHU travel used a variety of methods to ensure we had that locked in. We started off with face-to-face communications. Being co-located helped people feel like they were part of a physical team, and everyone was more accountable for each other as a result. People became friends with each other, leading to happiness in working with others and more trust in fellow team members. As the pandemic hit and people started working more from home we used MS Teams to help facilitate meetings and have convenient communication with each other. Since moving online we started using Jira to track project roadmaps, backlogs, active springs, and so on. Overall, working online has been positive, but in-office interactions are something we are looking forward to in the future. Jira mostly helps our development team with managing their backlogs, but is also a great tool for the product owner to use for planning the product roadmap and seeing the progress of the project.

The agile process has its pros and cons, and both were seen in SNHU travel. SNHU travel’s product is highly dependent on flexibility, customer feedback, and rapid development, so agile was the right choice. Some of the pro’s include: having an iterative process on things like user stories so that best results are achieved, faster production by having a working version of the product out each sprint, and high focus on customer satisfaction/feedback. The cons include: having a strict team with key players, if one member is not doing anything it can be bad for the whole team, and constant changing requirements can be impossible to keep up with if you are trying to satisfy all possible feedback. Another con could be that it might be difficult to scope out a budget for the project, if there is no set-in-stone end date/requirements.

Nonetheless, if SNHU travel wants to be a top competitor in travel websites in the future, they have to apply the iterative agile approach, focus on customer feedback, and ensure sprints have meaningful goals that are fulfilling user stories.

References

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