Sprint Planning

Sprint planning is an important process for Agile methodologies. If product owners or Scrum masters don't take the time to schedule out upcoming work, team members may have a hard time understanding what they each need to focus on—especially if there are any dependencies between current and upcoming tasks.

Here are a few ways you can keep your sprint planning organized, and your sprint planning meeting running smoothly.

What is sprint planning?

Sprint planning is a stage in Agile methodologies in which teams decide which tasks to complete in an upcoming sprint and how that work will be achieved. A sprint planning meeting is a meeting that is dedicated to planning the next sprint. Depending on the methodology used, this meeting is often run by the product owner or a Scrum master.

During the sprint planning meeting, product owners or Scrum masters choose specific product backlog items that fit their sprint goals. These decisions are made in collaboration with the development team or the Scrum team so they know exactly what work is upcoming in the next sprint. The developers on the team can help identify specific skills they're efficient at and identify their bandwidth for the next sprint.

Product backlog vs. Sprint backlog

When discussing backlogs, it's important to differentiate between the product backlog and the sprint backlog. A product backlog contains all of the tasks that need to be done in relation to a specific product. A sprint backlog is everything that needs to be completed for a specific sprint.

Key aspects of sprint planning

Planning a new sprint is never an exact science, and takes a shared understanding between team members to complete effectively. Sprint planning occurs after a sprint retrospective, which is a period of time when team members reflect on the previous sprint. This usually happens at the end of a sprint.

What is a sprint retrospective?

A sprint retrospective is a meeting dedicated to reflecting on the outcomes of the previous sprint. The goal of a sprint retrospective is to identify actions that could have gone better in the previous sprint, and apply those learnings to the upcoming sprint.

There are three main things you should think about when you and your team members are choosing the next sprint backlog items to complete.

- **What:** This is the objective or goal you want to achieve during the sprint. The items you select from the project backlog should all tie back to the purpose of the upcoming sprint. Most of the time, the sprint goal ties back to an overarching goal, such as an OKR.

- **How:** This is the work that needs to be done to complete a backlog item, including the specific strategies that your team will use. Team members work with Scrum masters and product owners to identify if there is a specific way sprint backlog items need to be completed. This is all included in sprint planning. That way, when the sprint is in progress, the entire Scrum team knows exactly what they need to do and how to do it.

- **Who:** This is the group of people who are working on specific backlog items. The "who" is a key component of sprint planning sessions, because it prevents the overlap of work and ensures that the work being put into the sprint backlog doesn't exceed your team capacity. Highlighting who's responsible for each task also gives key stakeholders a clear point of contact for each item in the sprint backlog.

How to prepare for a sprint planning meeting

Preparing for a sprint planning meeting is easy as long as you follow a few common steps. Here are three tips to ensure that your sprint planning meeting goes smoothly every time.

1. Ensure your team has a clearly defined leader

One of the benefits of Agile project management is that a clear leader is baked into the process. A product owner or Scrum master are often leaders of Agile development teams.

Agile leaders manage sprint planning, organizing product backlog items, and ensuring that the entire Scrum team stays on track against the sprint timeline. They also ensure their team's capacity is manageable. If they notice a team member with a heavy load of work, it's up to them to figure out a solution for how to help the team member progress without being overburdened.

2. Complete backlog refinement regularly

Having a regularly maintained product backlog is an easy way to preserve clarity and ensure that your team is focused on the right tasks. Since Agile teams run 2-week sprints, product managers can set aside some time twice a month to refine their product backlog.

The goal of refining the product backlog is to prepare each item in the backlog so it's ready for development. If there are backlog items that have vague stories or large amounts of work, it's the responsibility of the team leader to make sure each of these items are ready for development. If a

user story is too vague, they may work with whoever created the backlog item to get more details. If an item requires a large amount of work, they can break it up into smaller items.

This can help a sprint retrospective and sprint planning session go more smoothly. If the product backlog is regularly maintained, the team leader will already know which tasks need to be completed.

3. Focus on functionality—not just tasks

The Agile methodology puts a heavy emphasis on customer input and satisfaction. One common way that teams incorporate this is with user stories. User stories are general explanations of how an end product should function from the perspective of the customer. This allows team members to come up with unique solutions that benefit the end customer, instead of just marking a task off their to-do list.

Benefits of sprint planning

While the Agile methodology is primarily used in software development, it's not limited to development teams. Any team can use Agile methodologies, and by extension, sprint planning. Here are some ways that sprint planning can help your team reach their goals.

- Increased focus - When your team members have a crystal-clear idea of what their 2-week sprint looks like, there's no room for other projects to get in the way. Each team member has something they need to focus on for those two weeks, and when the whole team finishes each part, major initiatives get completed faster. This level of focus is a major foundation of the Scrum and Agile frameworks. Identifying an area of focus for each team member helps you achieve a large amount of work without smaller distractions getting in the way.

- Increased transparency - Sprint planning meetings generally include the entire Scrum or Agile team. Including everyone in the meeting ensures that no one has any questions about what other people are working on. As a result, it's less likely that the team duplicates work as everyone plans a sprint together. Scrum teams also share a unified definition of what "done" means for a completed task. This means that all tasks must pass all of the criteria the team has laid out for each backlog item before being marked "complete."

- Teams produce higher quality work - By incorporating user stories and allowing team members to focus on specific tasks, sprint planning helps team members produce higher quality work. Thanks to sprint planning, team members have an extremely clear

understanding of what needs to be done and how they can move forward to develop the right solution for complicated problems.