Building an Agile Team Structure

Agile Guide

on an Agile project. These elements include the project activities, workflows, and team roles. The structure is essentially a foundational model to help guide Agile teams in their work and organize their operating procedures.

In 1965, US psychologist Bruce Tuckman proposed a model for the stages of group development:

Forming → Storming → Norming → Performing

This flexible framework is favored by Agile project managers because they can use it to guide their teams through various projects. Each time a team member leaves or joins, they can revert to the forming stage and start all over again. This level of team structure is vital for scaling Agile teams.

A good team structure creates clarity, so everyone knows what their responsibilities are. The added layer of Agile ensures that the team is flexible and can respond quickly and effectively to changes.

Characteristics of an Agile team structure

Cross-functional: An Agile team structure is cross-functional. Each team member has their own specific skill set, but they all work towards a common goal: producing deliverables on time to satisfy the customer.

Collaborative: There is plenty of collaboration and open communication within a cross-functional Agile team. Some team members will even participate in cross-training, working alongside their colleagues to learn from them and develop new skills. These team members are described as "T-shaped" — the horizontal line represents their general understanding of various skills, while the vertical line is their core area of expertise.

Non-hierarchical: Another key element to an Agile team structure is that it is non-hierarchical. Agile teams favor a flat structure where people are given the autonomy to work independently and organize themselves. Each team member has a defined role and responsibility, but unnecessary layers of management are removed, enabling people to self-manage effectively. This works quite well in small groups — for example, the recommended size of a Scrum team is between three and nine, so it makes sense for each team member to be on the same level.

Team structure: Traditional vs. Agile

The aforementioned lack of hierarchy distinguishes the Agile team structure from a traditional one, where there is a top-down approach to project management.

In this traditional environment, a manager will delegate tasks and dictate how they should be completed. While this structure may work for larger organizations, it is not advisable for Agile teams. In fact, Financial Times notes that "a hierarchical structure can hinder a team by encouraging politicking and unproductive rivalry." In an ideal Agile environment, this rivalry does not exist. Agile teams do not typically promote internal competition — rather, they are united in their shared objectives.

Now that we know what a basic Agile team structure looks like, let's explore the different types of teams.

Types of Agile team structure

The type of structure followed by an Agile team will depend on a number of factors, including cost, available resources, and the type of project. There is no optimal structure — different frameworks work for different teams, and each option will have its own advantages and disadvantages.

Here are some key examples of Agile team structures:

Generalist

As the name suggests, a generalist structure is one where each team member has a general understanding of a wide variety of topics without delving too deeply into any particular one. In simple terms, a generalist is a “Jack of all trades” — they know a little about a lot of things. Because of their versatility, they can work on a number of diverse tasks and switch easily with their colleagues. This Agile structure is typically seen in smaller teams and works well in the sales industry, where professionals can use their base knowledge to sell across many different company sectors.

Specialist

The opposite of a generalist, a specialist is someone with a specific area of expertise. In a specialist team structure, everyone has a different niche and is responsible for the tasks that fall under their domain. These “gurus” are highly valuable to a team as they can offer detailed insights into complex areas, leading to better-quality products. This structure is more common in a larger Agile team, where there are enough people to cover every specific knowledge area. Examples of specialists include programmers, database administrators, product developers, and Agile practitioners.

Hybrid

A hybrid team structure has a combination of both generalists and specialists. Within this team, each specialist will focus on building their own complex component of the project, while the generalists will tie these components together and ensure the project makes sense as a whole. The flexibility offered by a hybrid structure is aligned with the ethos of Agile itself. It also means Agile teams can gain the extensive knowledge offered by both generalist and specialist approaches. Advantages of a hybrid structure include improved teamwork, high-quality deliverables, and a greater sense of ownership.

Parallel

In a parallel structure, Agile team members change tasks with each new iteration. For example, if everyone is working on software development in one sprint, they will all move to software testing in the next sprint. This way, teams can deliver software in parallel. This approach requires extensive training and experienced team members that can adapt seamlessly to a variety of roles.

Sub-team

This structure is essentially a team within a team. Sub-teams are individual units that exist within larger Agile teams. They work on a particular area, which combines with other areas to form an overall project deliverable. The sub-team structure is used to break large projects down into digestible parts, boosting visibility and accountability.

Another example of an Agile team structure is transitioning, used when a team is switching to an Agile project management methodology. We discuss the process of Agile transformation in more detail here.

Agile team: Key roles and responsibilities

An Agile team structure will commonly outline specific roles for each team member. While the focus is on a person's skill set rather than their job title, a defined set of roles can create clarity in Agile workflows.

These roles will vary depending on the project management methodology used by a team. In a Scrum environment, there are prescribed roles. However, Kanban teams are an outlier as they opt for a more fluid approach, with no mandatory roles.

Here are some of the key roles in an Agile team structure:

Team lead

A team lead is responsible for coordinating the team and ensuring that processes run smoothly. They will organize incoming requests, manage tasks, monitor workflows, and host meetings. They will also ensure the team is following the principles as outlined in the Agile Manifesto. In Scrum, a team lead is known as a Scrum master.

Product owner

A product owner represents the needs of the client. Their job is to clearly outline the customer requirements and ensure they are met throughout the Agile project life cycle. They will communicate regularly with the team, offering guidance on features to include and informing them of what needs to be prioritized.

Team member

Team member is a broad term that can denote a number of different roles across different industries. For example, an Agile development team will be made up of programmers, UX designers, software developers, and quality assurance testers. A digital marketing team, on the other hand, could include copywriters, editors, PPC managers, SEO specialists, and more. All of these people can be referred to as team members in an Agile team structure.

Stakeholder

A stakeholder is not directly involved in the project activities, but they play an important role in determining the final deliverables. Stakeholders will liaise regularly with the team lead, product owner, and team members to offer input into the development process. Their feedback could significantly influence the end result of the project. Stakeholder examples include end-users, investors, and senior company executives.

In a larger Agile team structure, additional roles could include independent testers, enterprise architects, system integrators, and subject matter experts.

How to build an Agile team structure

Want to build your Agile team structure but don’t know where to start? Follow these steps:

1. **Choose your model:** Would your project be more suited to a team of generalists or specialists? Do you have the resources to create a hybrid structure? Is your project large enough to be broken down into sub-teams? Analyze these factors to decide which structure would work best for you.

2. **Assign roles:** Take some time to assess your Agile team members’ skills before assigning them to different roles. Ensure each team member has the capacity to take on the role assigned to them.

3. **Stay adaptable:** Remember that an Agile team structure is designed to be flexible and adaptable to your needs. Listen to your team and make adjustments if something isn’t working.

Use Agile software: When managing Agile teams, an all-in-one project management platform such as Wrike will help you add structure to your daily activities. Create project folders, build team dashboards, and customize your workflows with one software solution.

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