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Why Is Agile So Awkward, And What Can You Do About It?



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POST WRITTEN BY

Pete Sinclair

CEO of **Obo**, a SaaS company dedicated to helping product teams create successful products aligned with market needs and business objectives.



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Many companies have adopted Agile development

Created by a small group of software practitioners and thought leaders in 2001 with their publication of the [Manifesto for Agile Software Development](#), Agile is designed to deliver continuous improvement to customers while avoiding ridiculously long

development cycles. It has since been adopted industrywide and become a [development standard](#).

Agile development increases productivity by empowering self-organizing, cross-disciplinary teams to figure out the [best way](#) to get work done. Agile development teams organize work into relatively short sprints, usually two weeks, and work collaboratively with customers or end-users. Agile standards opt for flexible and adaptable planning methods, development that evolves along the way, early delivery and continuous improvement throughout the process. It also encourages developers to rapidly respond to and adapt to change.

While Agile can be great for speeding up software delivery, in practice, it creates challenges for those tasked with leading and managing products for long-term success. Its focus on sprint-based delivery can foster a short-sighted approach that doesn't adequately address product or business strategy. Why?

Speed Not Scale

Agile is designed for speed, [not scale](#). Agile often fails to scale because the methodology was designed specifically to support small projects where it's clear who the customer is and that customer can be engaged in the process. Many teams stumble when applying Agile to larger, more complex projects and products. It's a lot of work to break down features and functions that cross teams and components, then ensure those pieces come together into coherent product releases.

Not every team or sprint-sized bite of work has a clear customer or user with whom to work directly — or the time it takes to test and iterate. Product managers must frequently assume the role of intermediary between development teams and customers or prospects. Ideally, they document and communicate what they learn — and share that data to guide product decisions.

Completed Versus Needed

Agile development measures success by delivery of working software. But sprint success does not equal product success. Breaking requirements down into sprint-sized deliverables can make it hard to assess how well the code aligns with customer and market needs. It's easy to get a thumbs-up for incremental features that don't sufficiently contribute to long-term product success.

As a result, Agile development can lead to incomplete products or features that miss the mark. If you're trying to plan and scope a major product release with many moving parts, Agile development requires constant vigilance to ensure that bigger, longer-term features planned for the release aren't compromised when delivered in sprint-sized chunks — and that functionality spanning different teams comes together as expected to meet market needs.

Team Over Product Plan

Agile teams decide what to do, how to do it and when to do it, so it's easy to make choices that inadvertently derail the overall product plan. With working code as their success metric, teams may make choices or take shortcuts to ensure they deliver functioning software within their sprint. Small changes to plans that have interdependencies can cause big ripple effects and unintended consequences that affect other development teams, sales, customers and others.

How Product Management Can Become Agile (To Support Agile)

What can product managers and product leaders do to address the challenges of Agile development? Be more agile. Yes, that's little "a" agile, not big "A" Agile, as in responsive, anticipating change and providing frameworks that capture the needs and perspectives of the product's different constituencies — its different stakeholders, its customers and the market.

Here are three ways product managers can become agile:

1. Provide data that identifies high-impact features that customers, stakeholders and the market want.

The first principle of Agile development values individuals and interactions over processes and tools, so a product manager who brings the right data to the team will quickly earn respect and drive product success. Product managers need to gather, share and use data to inform product plans and ensure that development teams have access to the data they need to make their best decisions. Ideally, show who wants what, so everyone knows what features different constituents want as well as which features contribute the most to key business objectives (your company or organization KPIs or OKRs).

2. Balance short- and long-term requirements.

Product managers and leaders need to orchestrate and balance both short- and long term requirements. Start by understanding customer needs, gauging the value and cost of potential solutions and using that information to prioritize what to build based on available resources. Product leaders must prioritize and plan for longer horizons and then work across product management and development teams to break work down into sequential deliverables that map into Agile development's sprint timeframes.

3. Lead with the right product success metrics.

How can product leaders inject more strategic thinking into Agile development? Closing disconnects between metrics for sprint success and product success may be the most important thing product managers can do, as it ensures everyone on the extended product team understands what's at stake beyond the current sprint and the next release. Product leaders should communicate clear, prioritized product success criteria and ask team members to use them to frame product decisions. When developers understand the needs, priorities and objectives for the products they are building, they can better align short-term decisions with longer-term objectives.

A New World Of Agile Product Management

Product leaders need a more flexible, integrated and agile approach to managing the products and plans. By adopting agile product management, they can address the challenges of Agile development, become a more valuable participant in the Agile development process and deliver products that better address customer and market needs.

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