

BUSINESS AGILITY

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Do you dare to ask your HR manager to practice Kanban?

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Exilesoft: A mid-sized offshore software development company based in Sri Lanka, specialising in system design, application development, system integration, and business automation.

In 2008, in order to overcome specific offshore challenges, and to improve its quality and productivity, Exilesoft undertook an Agile transformation programme within its project office and delivery teams. While this was highly successful, the rapid change from traditional project culture to Agile culture, as well as the speedy growth of the project organisation, supporting functions, such as HR and operations, were unable to meet the demands of the delivery teams. In response, HR department processes became stricter, in order to cope with the situation and continue to deliver results. Yet these attempts often resulted in delays, and a lack of quality in every aspect of their work, from deliverables to services. Given the success of the Agile transformation programme within the delivery teams, senior members of the company believed that using the same Agile concepts within the HR department, would also deliver positive results.

THE PROBLEMS

After a few rounds of discussions, and careful analysis by engineering staff, project and HR management, greater clarity was obtained about key impediments. These included:

- Inefficient recruitment processes when recruiting software engineers for project requirements.



Everything Agile

- Poorly targeted recruitment advertising campaigns that were not attracting senior engineers with the required skills and experience from the market.
- Handling of staff attendance and leave processes was out of sync with the day-to-day needs of the delivery teams.
- HR products and services were not occurring on a timely basis; extending these timelines created chaos in the delivery teams.
- Large and time consuming tasks, such as employee handbook creation, were often delivered late, and over several months.
- Incompatible employee evaluation processes with the delivery team culture.

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THE CAUSES

Most of the root causes of these problems related to the history that traditional offshore development processes, involving the remote Customer and the development teams, had faced before adapting to Agile practices.

- The HR department was isolated from the delivery teams.
- HR, and the delivery teams, had different understandings of what Agile meant.
- Most requests, such as recruitment needs, were sent to the HR department over e-mail, causing a lack of appreciation for the specific needs of the individual.
- Too much to do.

THE SOLUTION

To improve productivity, and resolve many of the problems above, the HR department agreed to try out a selected Agile method for their day-to-day operations. The initial idea was to implement Scrum processes, however, this was quickly discarded, as there were many foreseen difficulties. Primarily, the nature of HR deliverables meant a greater amount of ad hoc requests outside the Iteration cycle, many of which required immediate delivery outside the scheduled release (Iteration) cycle.

It was decided that Kanban would be a better fit for the HR department over the Scrum processes practised by Exilesoft's delivery teams. Kanban supported daily planning, continuous delivery, visible progress (through the Kanban Board), optional estimation, and cycle time monitoring (e.g. monitoring the time taken for a new employee to sign in with Exilesoft, from the time the request for the vacancy was raised). In addition, the concept of limiting Work In Process (WIP) prevented the HR department from committing to work on various tasks that would exceed their capacity. Instead, selecting the right priority, focusing on them, and delivering them faster, could deliver better results.

Lastly, by removing the separation between the HR department and the delivery teams, the expectation was to reduce any dependencies that may create latency. Further, this would avoid the 'over the wall' approach, and was expected to create better understanding, respect, and communication between people working in both the entities.

THE IMPLEMENTATION

The HR team was given sufficient training to convert from traditional management thinking to Agile leadership and team play thinking. To manage the incoming requirements for the HR department, it was agreed to use the same backlog format as the delivery teams. For example

ID	As a/an/the	I need	So that
1	CEO of the company	All the employees to be aware of the company administration policies	There will be lesser day-to-day issues to be handled with regard to disciplinary issues
2	Team lead	To have an event organised for the team, to celebrate the upcoming final release of the project	We can recognise the team effort
3	Staff	To produce a letter to the Australian Migration office before end of November	I can prove my work experience needed for the PR application
4	Project director	Five new recruits in Java tech lead calibre by 1st week of December 2009	We can initiate the new automated warehouse product development

To visualise progress, the HR manager's office wall was originally used as the task board. The stories were pasted in the stack column, and the highest priority stories were broken into tasks, and pasted in the 'To do' column. Identically coloured sticky notes were used to identify the tasks falling under one User Story.



Figure 1: Example card

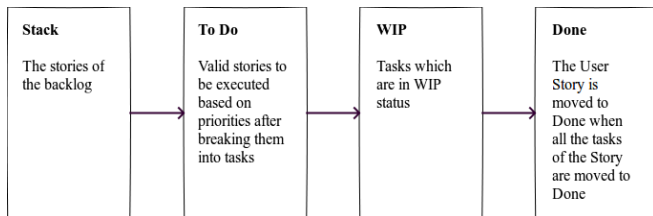


Figure 2: Kanban Board

Finally, the HR team conducted daily meetings in front of the Kanban Board at 9.30 am Sri Lankan time; limited to 20 minutes. When there were other teams involved for specific tasks, those teams also participated in the same meeting, in order to update the HR team about their progress and dependencies.

THE CHALLENGES

The key challenges were as follows:

- Transparent tasks on the Kanban Board. Some tasks reflected sensitive information to the staff. To avoid such display of tasks on the HR manager's office wall, it was decided to have a web-based Kanban tool.
- Minor ad hoc tasks. There were many smaller tasks flowing to the HR department daily. A guideline had to be agreed by the team members about the size of the tasks taken in to the Kanban Board.
- Dealing with daily routine tasks. Those tasks were handled outside the Kanban Board. The members decided on a six-hour Kanban day,

instead of an eight-hour day, in order to leave room for such work.

- Difference of team culture to the delivery teams which requires ongoing analysis.

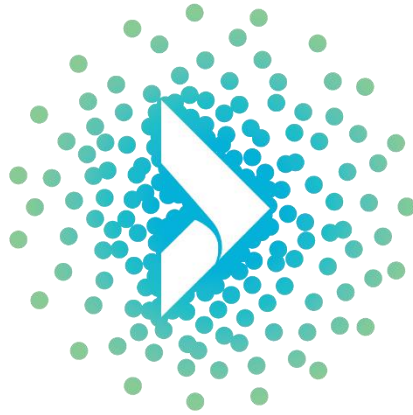
THE OUTCOMES

The above implementation delivered visible, and positive, results after six months. The HR department, and the delivery teams, started to work more closely, with a better understanding of each other's capacity, priorities, and the expected level of quality. This created a more solution-focused culture at Exilesoft, instead of different entities trying to pass the work, and blame each other. Some of the key visibilities:

- The HR department is much more productive than before.
- Communication and delegation among the HR staff has greatly improved.
- Most discussions with the delivery teams are now handled via casual discussions, instead of issuing formal letters, and calling for formal meetings.
- The annual review process has changed to more frequent reviews, which are expected to reinforce, and energise, the culture in a positive manner.
- The company's Agile maturity is used in the recruitment process to attract better candidates who want to work in a different culture, against the typical offshore software factory culture.
- The HR department empowers more team activities in the organisation, such as arts competitions, and games among the teams.
- The HR department has won more recognition from the project organisation, due to their genuine effort to facilitate the performance of the project organisation.

Today, Exilesoft has overcome most of the key challenges of such Agile transition, by standardising the same concepts across other entities, such as the HR department. This transformation has resulted in productivity improvements, and better, self-motivated teams across the organisation.

- **Thushara Wijewardena, Chief Project Officer, Exilesoft**



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