

Why switch a failing waterfall project over to agile?

Anybody who has worked on a large, bogged down, waterfall project will find the following anecdote amusing I am sure.

Tom: Hello Fred, where are you off to in such a hurry?

Fred: Hello Tom, sorry I don't have time to stop and chat, our project is way overdue and I have to go to a meeting to plan our meetings.

Although the idea of attending a meeting to plan meetings is probably ludicrous to many of you, it represents the epitome of the Waterfall methodology.

Waterfall projects fail for many reasons; there is a direct correlation between the percentage of failed projects and overall project timescale. Often a long project will have seen a fair level of staff turnover, combined with an increasingly long period of time since the original design concept was developed. The planning may be superb but if the members of the project staff do not understand the scope of the original project, or were never fully integrated into the project team when employed to replace a departing project member it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clear vision of the project goals.

By switching a long-term, failing project from a waterfall based form of project management to agile methods presents an organisation with the ability to review project goals, analyse past performance and refresh the project teams understanding.

Often a failing project will fall under the critical eye of top-level management as costs rise and no deliverables are produced. A switch to agile will allow a project to start producing recognizable results in the short term. This will help to raise the falling opinion and remind the organisation of the initial perceived value of the project.

For a project with an out of control budget then switching to agile will allow for tighter financial control across the much smaller agile iterations. When planning a far reaching waterfall project, budget is often calculated incorrectly as it is almost impossible to foresee every possible future problem. Agile on the other hand allows for shorter budgeting periods, clearer indication of future budget requirements and tighter controls on overspending.

A switch to agile becomes increasingly beneficial when introduced to a project that is struggling to pass the test and review stage. The agile method is especially suitable in this situation as it inherently promotes quick turnaround, fast response and instant solutions.

There are clear short-term benefits to a failing project in switching to agile, the implementation of the agile methodology including its short-term iteration approach to software development allows a failing project team to quickly revisit and redevelop problem project areas as needed. This single benefit alone is often enough to save the project, as results no matter how small are deemed preferable to no results at all.

Long-term benefits include increased project awareness for new team members, restored confidence in the original project concept and the inclusion of clear and present business critical design requirements that were not evident at the project inception and thus fell out of scope.