Agile by Incrementalism
Sharon Herstein

With Agile adoption increasingly popular, many companies feel compelled to forego Waterfall for Agile. But, depending on the organization’s goals, complete abandonment of existing processes may not be necessary and a blend or partial transition can bring positive Agile change without drastic disruption. Incremental product development is only part of the Agile story, but it may be all you need.

Fully effective Agile adoption usually involves a culture shift and maybe even a re-shuffling of the organization. These aspects give many companies pause; they make adoption costly and those that attempt it unguided can end up frustrated and unfulfilled. But by setting wholesale Agile adoption aside and putting the focus on shifting product development to an incremental approach, these types of disruptions may be avoided and significant upside provided even without entirely transitioning. While not all of the benefits of Agile would be realized, some benefit is certainly preferable to none.

Applying incrementalism to common business goals can set an organization along its Agile path. It may be sufficient on its own or may eventually, even organically, lead to a fuller Agile adoption. Common drivers of Agile adoption are a desire to gain flexibility, move faster, mitigate risk, improve transparency or increase value and incrementalism can realize any of these goals.

Planning smaller deliverables lessens the impact of changes in scope or priority thereby providing flexibility.

Reducing the scale of each deliverable helps it move faster through the process including delivering more frequently thereby regularly increasing value to customers.

Incrementalism is a natural risk-mitigator because it reduces scope breadth and timeline duration. Deliverables are being produced on a smaller scale with a higher frequency which permits risk to be evaluated more often. This is similarly how incrementalism improves transparency.

There are many frameworks and methods associated with Agile and each one may have its own impact on the role of Project Management. Forgoing the selection of a specific type of Agile and instead embarking on an effort to transform the deliverable itself from one large to several smaller deliverables brings incrementalism into the existing product development process and preserves Project Management. Once aspects of the product are separated it follows that the planning, execution and delivery activities will each be reduced in duration but increase in frequency, providing more opportunities to adapt and change based on succeeding sooner or even failing faster albeit on a smaller scale than the original process provided. The Project Management Process Groups and Knowledge Areas still exist but will have a narrower focus on the newly derived smaller deliverable. Scope still needs definition and planning still occurs but with a newly deliberate focus.

How is incrementalism practiced? Most basically by separating the single, large existing deliverable into multiple, smaller deliverables. So if current product development resembles asking a Business or Product team to list and describe in detail each requirement they have for the product and then handing those requirements off to a
Development team to estimate and execute, then incrementalism brings focus to the single most important requirement. Before diving into detail and estimation on all of the requirements, those activities are performed around this single, highest priority and a decision is made to either proceed on to execution and delivery or forgo it for the next most important requirement. The execution still requires the monitoring & control of Project Management.

Getting on the path to incrementalism requires an organization to trade-in large scopes and long durations for smaller and more frequent cycles. Successes (and failures) will occur sooner but on a smaller scale. Existing processes stay mostly in-tact but they are being applied to more discreet parts of the product resulting in smaller outputs that are available sooner instead of the product's entirety, which becomes available eventually. Because there's undoubtedly a way for creating deliverables in the organization now, the change incrementalism brings will not be to up-end that process but to have it produce deliverables that are smaller with more frequency. The way the product is planned & executed is basically the same as it was before only distributed into shorter, recurring bursts.

Some Agilists may argue that I am advocating ‘mini-Waterfalls’ and if that's the case, it's not a reason not to incrementalize an existing product development process. Separating large aspects of a product into smaller pieces for more focused planning and execution brings focus to a team and ultimately improves the product's quality through the frequent feedback resulting from the more concentrated release. The role of Project Management remains, although it too will be incrementalized.

About the Author

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Sharon Herstein is a Web Developer turned Project Manager and has been practicing technical project management across industries for over 10 years. She specializes in creating efficiencies and scalability for start-ups and mature organizations alike; relying upon deep theoretical understanding of both Waterfall and Agile to create practical solutions.

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