5 High-Impact Agile Fail Points, and How to Avoid Them

Key Considerations for effectively using agile across distributed teams and complex product lines

INTRODUCTION

Agile software development methods are swiftly gaining acceptance. The promise of bringing better products to market faster creates advantages that appeal not only to agile teams, but management as well. Yet, as many companies and IT organizations are learning, adopting an agile process in and of itself is not a silver bullet. The process must be driven by business value at the core. If not, the new speed and fluidity agile introduces can actually increase the risk of creating products that miss customer needs and threaten revenue goals.

The key is balancing team productivity with market alignment. This is easier to understand conceptually than it is to execute. For large or dynamic organizations the risk is particularly high. They must deal with widely-dispersed teams, often in different locations and time zones. In addition, they usually have more complex portfolios that require tight interdependencies that can span functionality and architecture.

Agile Value Management: achieving team productivity and product alignment

Agile Value Management (AVM) is the discipline of maximizing the business value of every sprint. It delivers the simultaneous benefits of team productivity and alignment.
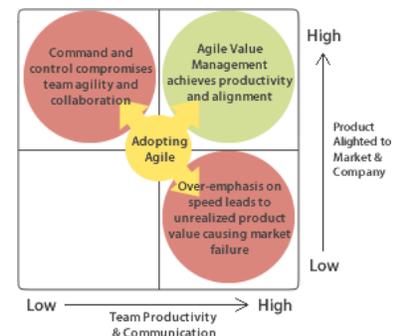
Five high-impact agile fail points you can overcome with Agile Value Management

In this paper we'll expose five high-impact failure areas that emerge as companies implement agile in complex, distributed team environments. We'll also discuss their causes and identify pitfalls to avoid.

When scaling agile to multiple distributed teams, traditional agile approaches become less effective:

1. Fluid face-to-face communication is no longer possible, causing communication gaps and productivity burdens
2. Distributed developers don't have easy access to the product owner or to rich feature content for collaboration and insight
3. Unclear voice of customer creates uncertain product decisions
4. Treating agile as a rigid process or a checklist - as if it were a traditional enterprise methodology - doesn't allow for adaptability
5. Synchronizing cross team dependencies and emergent architecture requirements can result in product delays and incomplete feature delivery

Additionally, we'll show you how Agile Value Management can be applied using the Accept360 Execution module, one module in the integrated Accept360 solution suite that delivers agility across ideation, planning, and execution.

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FLUID FACE-TO-FACE COMMUNICATION IS NO LONGER POSSIBLE, CAUSING COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWNS.

Agile was originally developed for single small co-located teams, with the ideal system for sprint management consisting of a whiteboard with sticky notes and daily face- to-face Scrum meetings with all team members. But when the team is spread across multiple locations and time zones, or the project involves a release with multiple teams and dependencies, how do you keep all your teams on the same page, all the time?

Impact:

- Communication volleys diminish productivity and delay critical path decisions
- Resource utilization is marginalized
- Reduced daily Scrum visibility leads to misunderstandings and team inefficiency

Accept Agile gets distributed teams on the same playbook

The Accept360 Execution module supports the distributed team dynamic that requires different methods and tools to keep everyone on the same page. It delivers real time visibility, traceability, quality, and accountability across the enterprise. You can easily track progress and ensure visibility and strategic alignment between groups. Further, because agile shifts the onus of project documentation from project manager to developer and Scrum Master, the Accept360 Execution module makes it easy to manage - keeping the goal of velocity without sacrificing quality. The Accept360 Execution module delivers:

- Access to shared, current product data for distributed teams that enables a focus on tasks and results instead of chasing down information
- Specific stakeholder-relevant UI that keeps information simple, manageable, and exactly where the team expects to find it
- Easy inline feature editing to record status updates using task boards and table views, making it easier on developers
- Epics, features, and user stories all linked and traceable back to the source requirements
- Standard burndown and velocity reports that make it easy to manage daily progress
- Release velocity maintained through version control, change notifications, and workflow

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DISTRIBUTED DEVELOPERS DON'T HAVE EASY ACCESS TO THE PRODUCT OWNER OR TO RICH FEATURE CONTENT FOR COLLABORATION AND INSIGHT

Even in a Waterfall approach, it is difficult to create and keep the DNA of every requirement, feature and user voice intact as it progresses from idea through product planning, prioritization, PRD, and sprint. It's the by-product of relying on an unconnected series of documents, tools, and tribal knowledge. Product management and engineering each has its own set of project management tools. Individual documents and spreadsheets are relied on as the primary method for organizing the knowledge, decisions, priorities, commitments, and thousands of other details that your product encompasses. Once a document is emailed to the team, its obsolescence begins and the problems of version control start.

Impact:

- Critical customer commits gets diluted, or worse, never delivered
- Re-work can impact velocity
- Efficiency is drained from endless circling between product owner and Scrum team

The Accept360 Execution module gives Scrum teams absolute clarity around the what, how, why, and when of every feature, intact and accessible throughout the sprint.

The Accept360 Execution module is unique in that it structures product data such that product owners can gather, prioritize, and manage it, yet also in a way that sprint teams expect to find, access, and use it. From the initial ideation stage through backlog prioritization and sprint delivery, intelligence accumulates, and features become a complete narrative with every detail intact including voice of customer.

The full value of each requirement is captured, preserved, and shared informing every step of your Scrum process, reducing risk, and improving customer satisfaction.

The Accept360 Execution module delivers:

- Centralized requirements repository that eases updates for product owners and eliminates version control problems for Scrum teams
- Simple Scrum team "whiteboard and post it notes" views that make it easy for engineers to find what they need
- Customer voice, requirements, features, and use cases, all linked to provide traceability back to the source
- Requirement artifacts, including design documents, test cases, engineering drawings, images, status, and more, all readily accessible to Scrum teams
- Requirements that can be viewed in relation to themes and customers, providing context for development
- Version control and change notification to keep information current

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UNCLEAR VOICE OF CUSTOMER CREATES UNCERTAIN PRODUCT DECISIONS

Every great product starts with a rich understanding of your customers and what they want. This "understanding" leads to an outside-in focus that optimizes team execution beyond efficiency alone, and prevents frequent backlog re-prioritization based on internal stakeholder opinion. For an agile process to be successful this requires:

- First, the ability to differentiate between one-off input from customers who might not represent the whole and a clustering of insights that deliver a more complete story
- Second, closing the gap between broad customer generalizations at one end, and at the other a crisp, distinctive picture of precisely what customers want that is insightful and actionable

Impact:

- Risk of missing customer need and company revenue increases
- Uncertain backlog prioritization is based on limited market validation
- Finger pointing and politics creep in during final sprint stages

Keeping your R&D decision-making firmly based on the genuine voice of the market is critical; however, it's only one lens. Company strategy must be part of the equation. For a sprint's maximum value to be realized, the balance of customer and company must be factored into the process.

The Accept360 Execution module integrates user voice and company strategy for backlog prioritization throughout every sprint

A prioritized backlog is a cornerstone of agile development. The results delivered by each sprint are a function of the quality of the backlog and user stories, and the accuracy of the prioritization. With the Accept360 Execution module you can:

- Align each sprint with your business objectives, market, and customer insights, and forge your backlog into a strategic spearhead that stands to deliver far greater business value
- Connect epics down to features and real user stories, providing greater clarity
- Identify less critical features that can be refined as they rise to the top of the next backlog
- Provide downstream use case clarity required by the Scrum team and upstream traceability when questions arise during development
- Avoid time wasted in unnecessary meetings, sifting through documents, or exchanging email to discover historical or contextual details
- Draw out conflicting agendas between stakeholders early in the process by aligning around a common goal that is rooted in clear and validated market insight

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The purpose of agile is to bring better products to market faster, with the added advantage of market responsiveness. The challenge is, if implemented incorrectly or empowered with the wrong tool, it can actually slow you down - causing developers to burn precious time they simply can't waste. While there are many different agile methodologies, and all share a common goal - an emphasis on small teams empowered to deliver high-quality software iteratively and they differ in important ways. Some have a more rigid, prescribed approach, where others are looser frameworks. Some teams select an agile approach based on the specific feature they are committed to deliver. Others mix elements creating a hybrid approach that works for them.

Impact:

- Command and control stifles distributed team agility
- Over-focus on process adherence sacrifices agile value delivery
- Team forced to shoehorn methods can't adapt, and blame process

The Accept360 Agile module supports multiple   methodologies as well as hybrid approaches

The Accept360 Execution module supports a full range of agile methodologies. Or, you can create a hybrid that draws the best approaches from multiple methodologies. For product owners, the Accept360 Execution module also supports leading product planning methodologies. By providing this flexibility, Accept lets product management and product development organizations both work from a single system of record yet implement the approach best suited to manage their unique processes. The Accept360 Execution module delivers several benefits:

- Support for multiple methodologies including Scrum, Feature-Driven Development, Agile Unifed Process, Extreme Programming, and more
- Configurable to your specific team processes, members, and needs using custom properties, content templates and activities, and customized naming conventions
- Workflow/organizational flexibility that facilitates continuous improvement by allowing adaptation to changing processes
- Application flexibility that enables distributed teams to self-organize in more robust sub-groups based around compatible skills, attitudes, and approaches to work

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SYNCHRONIZING CROSS TEAM DEPENDENCIES ACROSS COMPLEX PRODUCTS CAN CAUSE DELAYS AND INCOMPLETE DELIVERY

Organizations that face this issue typically fall into two camps: those who have succeeded with agile on small, single team efforts and are now involved in large, mission-critical systems; and those who have already started on the agile path for complex systems and find themselves overwhelmed by too many moving parts and people reverting to the old way of doing things. Complex systems cannot be handled by a single agile team.

- Dependencies across teams require tight coordination to deliver working versions at the end of each sprint
- The scope of platform/architecture work is too big to be part of a functional team effort
- The backlog for the entire system is too big to be managed at the sprint level

Several methods have emerged for managing agile in the context of complex systems and dependencies:

- Synchronizing releases, architecture, and sprints involves organizing work along frequent release trains such as coordinating functional and architecture tracks. Sprints don't need to have the same duration; however, end dates should be coordinated and rolled up.
- Grouping backlogs by tier enables you to manage the backlog at the level of epics. Next you break down a feature backlog for each release train and have your stories backlog at the team level for sprints.
- Virtual daily Scrums and Scrums of Scrums go a long way toward providing everybody on the team with a clear picture of who is doing what and when, and of critical issues

With the Accept360 Execution module you can:

- Manage cross-plan upstream and downstream dependencies, with a virtual Scrum board and tasks with ability to drill into feature, user story, status, and other details
- Manage change impact by capturing change decisions and communicating impact to affected constituents (customers, partners, other internal departments). Understanding how decisions impact strategy, alignment, and commitments is greatly enhanced
- Prioritize backlogs for products, epics, features, and stories in the context of your market strategy, ensuring Agile Value Management

Impact:

- Poor visibility causes product/customer alignment chasm
- Information gaps lead to schedule delays and unwanted surprises
- Critical details and interdependencies get lost in translation or missed together

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About Accept Software Inc.

Accept Software, Inc. delivers The Product Innovation Management solution that technology-driven companies use to decide which products to bring to market for the fastest time-to-profit. The Accept360 Suite is the only complete end-to-end software solution that tightly links company and product strategy through ideation, portfolio planning, roadmaps, requirements and execution. For more information, visit www.accept360.com

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