Project Assurance
for Agile Projects

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Lean-Agile Project Assurance

Certain project assurance functions expect to see documentation, plans, review points and, in fact, so do some project sponsors. What happens when project teams adopt an Agile delivery framework? What happens when the expectations, tools and techniques used by traditional project assurance don't fit the Agile model?

Project Assurance is a fundamental component of governance in financial services whether undertaken by Internal Audit or delegated to the Programme Management Office (PMO). In undertaking assurance, the auditor fulfils obligations to internal stakeholders and, in some industries, also to the external regulatory bodies.

Project assurance is profoundly different in the Lean-Agile world. Whilst in this white paper the project assurance principles are

applied in an Agile project or programme context, we also find that they equally add value to organisations using traditional Waterfall delivery processes.

In undertaking project assurance in the Lean-Agile world, it is essential that certain Agile principles are respected:

- The Agile team is self-managing.

- Agile follows the 'just enough' and 'just in time' norms with regard to documentation.

- The team processes should be subject to continuous improvement.

- Working software is the primary illustration of progress.

Health Checks

Project assurance activities are goal driven.

The effort spent in achieving these goals, adds value by guaranteeing the health of the project initiative for stakeholders and encourages the project team to improve performance.

Independent auditors can identify systemic challenges or training development needs via a number of assurance health checks. An essential element of the Project Assurance Health Check is that the project is being reviewed and not individuals.

Evaluating project health is largely a question of establishing if the project is likely to achieve the desired business outcomes.

These outcomes, or benefits, were the reason why the project was undertaken and care must be taken to ensure that the project is executed in a way that preserves the targeted benefits. In some projects there will be a benefits realisation plan to manage; in others, the benefits will be realised by the deployment of the solution.

During inception, the project team will have identified stakeholders who need to be engaged with, or informed of, the project and its targeted business outcomes, and assess its impact on the organisation.

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How Agile are you?

Some stakeholders, with a high degree of interest in the project or a high degree of influence over the project, will likely be engaged by the sponsor as part of the project steering. Others will need to be kept informed or engaged as part of the project's change management activities. These activities include awareness communications, mobilisation communications, provisions for training and the like.

The project assurance activity should consider the level of engagement with, and participation of, stakeholders. It should also assess financial controls particularly with regard to allocations to capital expenditure and operational expenditure.

During the Release Planning phase, project delivery risks will have been assessed and risk responses developed. As the level of project delivery risk falls, the probability of success for the team increases.

Monitoring the project delivery risk level is therefore as important for Agile projects as it is on Waterfall projects, although the nature of the delivery risks could be different.

Assessing the project's attitude, awareness, and control over both sets of risks are crucial components of the project assurance activity.

Planning for benefits and engagement with stakeholders and Risk Management will place tasks on your workflow visualisation tool. Sometimes, particularly with a technically orientated project team, these activities get deferred or overlooked. Part of the project assurance role is to ensure that these important aspects of the project remain at the centre of the Agile activity.

Non-intrusive process

Remembering that the essence of Agile project delivery is the self-managed team, project assurance should be a non-intrusive process that uses the project lifecycle and Agile steps such as the Sprint review, and release planning as opportunities for input, recommendation and review.

In addition, the organisation will have defined a series of lightweight stage gates, or checkpoints, where the team either seeks a degree of synchronisation with other projects or is at a stage where funding is allocated.

It is essential that the project assurance effort is proportionate to the size and the level of the initiative's business risk. The activity should be based on mutual trust between the team and those involved in the assurance. It should be open and transparent, with observations or recommendations available to everyone.

The project assurance process has three elements:

1. Observation

2. Diagnosis

3. Recommendation

Observation

The goal of the observation step is to fill in some of the gaps and to collect subjective information.

As an Agile project team is light on formal documentation, the project assurance activity, by necessity, has a greater emphasis on observation rather than a forensic documentation review. However, some project documents will exist and these will provide the foundations for the project assurance activity. The Agile business case, for example, was used to obtain funding and stated the objectives and benefits from the investment.

Some of the observations will concern the rigour and adherence to the Agile principles. Yet project assurance requires an understanding that the Agile team will be adapting and continuously improving its delivery practices. It is essential that the project assurance activity does not inhibit the team adapting and improving.

Observations Project Assurance should take into consideration are:

- A clear vision of the future that is understood and shared by stakeholders.

- A strong focus on business benefits and any critical dependencies.

- An overall design, in sufficient detail, to plan and align the work of the Agile team with other projects and business changes.

- A release plan which will deliver benefits early, mitigate key risks, and allow lessons to be learned.

- A clear strategy and plan for transitioning from current systems, operations, organisations and suppliers to new arrangements.

- An understanding and adherence to the Agile governance framework and processes.

- An unambiguous indication from stakeholders during the Sprint review that the solutions being developed will meet the stated business needs and deliver the desired business outcomes.

As the principle indicator of progress in Agile is the demonstration of working software, the importance of the final observation in the list cannot be overstated.

Diagnosis

Objective data that project assurance have gathered from their observations can be used to form recommendations and conclusions regarding the overall health of the project.

Diagnosis in project assurance should make use of metrics. Again, the team is self-managing and may not produce all of the metrics all of the time. The auditor undertaking project assurance and the PMO function should not insist on a standard set of metrics for every project. However, some metrics should indicate a better sense of Agile project control than others, for example:

- A Risk Burndown Chart would show that the project has considered project delivery risks and that the sponsor is comfortable with the proposed profile.

- Value Created Metrics, a burnup on Value Created, will show that the project is on track or will give a rudimentary forecast completion date.

- The Epic Cadence gives an indication of how long an initiative takes from the beginning of development to completion. The Epic Cadence is used in order to meet the Programme Increment Plan. Project teams can use cadence to reduce wait times and identify blockages in the

development process. If normalised by the number of story points (the effort required to implement a piece of work), it can give an indication of the average rate of delivery within the project team.

- Velocity is the average amount of work a scrum team completes during a sprint, measured in either story points or hours, and is very useful for forecasting.

- Some quality metrics, such as the number of defects found/open/closed, will show that the team has a concern for the quality of the solution they are developing.

Metrics are important to enable project assurance to forecast the likelihood of a successful outcome. Diagnosis of the various metrics will allow the auditor to develop a full picture of the status of the project.

Due to the nature of Agile projects, those undertaking project assurance should be prepared to do the research and collect the metrics, especially if the project has decided that they do not require this information. The sources of data for the assurance analysis could be the various project displays but could also come from face-to-face meetings and conversations.

Recommendation

The goal of the recommendation step is to improve the project execution regarding rate and quality of delivery.

The output of the project assurance activity is normally a recommendation report with conclusions regarding the overall health of the project.

It seems an anathema to create a written report in an Agile world. However, project assurance reports often have a much wider circulation than the project team and may be used for things like training needs analysis.

Assurance reports can also be used to identify systemic challenges across the portfolio, or establish training requirements and tools needed for improvement. In some industries, external regulators may require access to the assurance report or may want to be satisfied that the project assurance activity has been thoroughly undertaken.

Project assurance reports should adopt the Agile principle of 'just enough' and the auditors should engage face-to-face with the team to suggest improvements or to challenge.

There are two key areas where verbal recommendations can be made – Sprint Planning and Sprint Review:

- During Sprint Planning, the Project Assurance function can make recommendations to the team and seek clarifications of their intent. Typical inputs could be estimation support (particularly to provide insights from other or previous projects), lessons learned from risks, delivery cadences and project techniques.

- During the Sprint Review the team is in 'show and tell' mode with key stakeholders and users and, at this point, they should also present a set of metrics which will indicate the status of the project. The Project Assurance function may use some Sprint reviews to make recommendations for improvement for the team to consider. The team will need to accept that some recommendations may come with more "focus" than others!

Project assurance needs to be cognisant of the team's need for privacy during their retrospective meeting, where external participation or intervention would typically prevent the team's openness and honesty in critiquing and suggesting means of improvement.

A different approach

It can be seen from this paper that Project Assurance for Lean-Agile projects is radically different to the approach used for traditional Waterfall projects. It calls for greater emphasis on adding value to the Agile delivery. In undertaking Agile Project Assurance the auditor will need to make judgements and cannot simply rely on the existence of various artefacts for evaluation purposes.

Change projects may benefit from independent review both during implementation or as soon after completion to make an assessment on achieving key objectives. Reviews performed on in-flight projects may provide an opportunity to change course and succeed. Post-implmentation reviews provide lessons for future projects.

Xcina Consulting's project assurance activities are performed by:

- Experienced and skilled resources who have sat on the other side and held roles to purchase consulting services – they understand the expectations of clients.

- Subject matter experts who are able to bring their knowledge and expertise to bear on the project.

- Consultants who are able to recommend pragmatic solutions.

- Credible individuals who are able to influence decision-makers.

- Xcina are here to help and support you so you can be in the knowledge that your project assurance activities are in safe hands

How can we help you?

To learn more about how we can assist you with your Business Change and Technology Change requirements and digital, operational and regulatory resilience needs, please feel free to contact:

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