

ENSURING SUCCESS IN AN AGILE-UX ENGAGEMENT

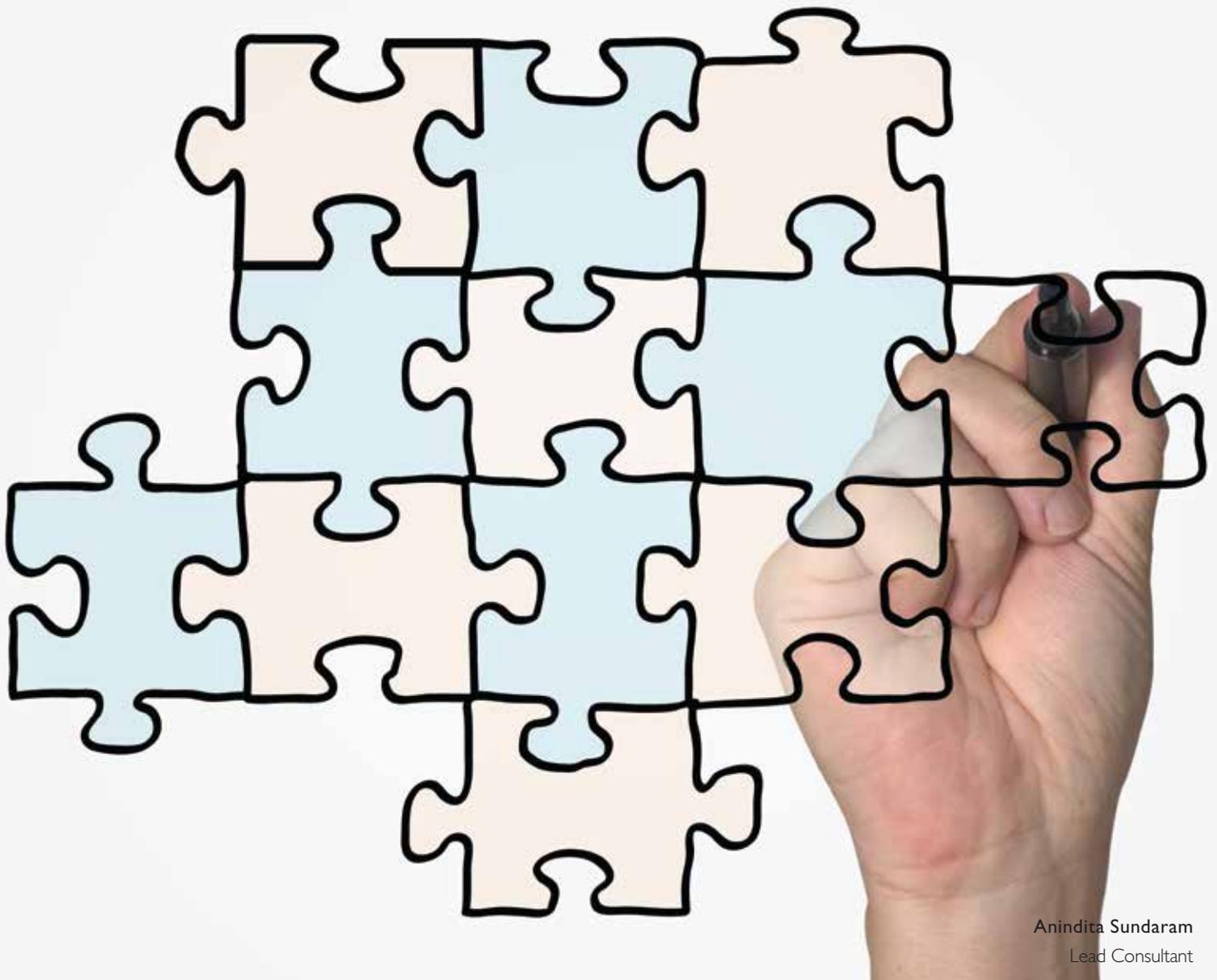


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Abstract

In the world of product design, speed to market and an intuitive design are two key considerations towards success. One without the other is unlikely to garner adoption or credibility given other equal opportunities. Consequently, primary features of most successful projects today are, the Agile Methodology and a focus on User Experience. Agile as a technique demands rapid, lightweight development cycles. User Experience Design is typically characterized by techniques such as persona development, card sorting, user testing and research. These techniques are often perceived as time consuming and as such, most often Agile and UX practitioners find themselves at odds. However, with due diligence and the right application of techniques, these strange partners can come together in harmony.

Central to this success is a core idea, a strong vision that drives focus on each piece of functionality that makes the product. Product teams then require a requisite amount of time to translate this idea into finite, achievable tasks and define the overall desired experience of end users in the form of Sprint 0. During and after the course of development, teams need room to maneuver and course correct on design and technical infrastructure without investing all their energies on new ideas. This course correction is facilitated through user testing and analytic trends that indicate usage and behavior. Finally, every successful execution of an Agile-UX engagement requires patience; patience to ideate, to plan, to correct, to maintain and to achieve. This paper examines the need for, the potential pitfalls and the path forward to make these two disciplines work to your advantage.

Introduction

Agile and UX as concepts have been in existence for a while now, although it is only more recently that both have become a priority for product owners. Agile is fancied for its flexibility and early feedback loop. In the age of instant gratification, Agile allows business owners to bring their ideas to life early instead of the waterfall era where ideas had to wait a couple of years to see the light of day.

User Experience (a key proponent of design thinking) is coveted as the differentiator of our age. At a time when everybody has everything available to them, the difference between a good and a great product lies in the most intuitive, most delightful option. All things equal, consumers choose an option that has the best experience.

It's really a catch-22; product owners look to get product-to-market earlier and the short feedback loop allows them to know if the experience is a win or loss in time to course correct. At any rate, as practitioners of either discipline will tell you, Agile and UX don't make the best mix.

Industry Perspective

Agile as an industry standard is touted to be the 'programmers methodology'; built for programmers by programmers. Agile is meant to be a lightweight methodology producing useful software earlier in the lifecycle of the product. This principle allows for new requirements and needs to be accommodated much later than typical in the product lifecycle. Typical aspects of Agile are speed-to-market, less to no documentation, Scrum-masters, planning poker and "T-shirt" estimates. These are to aid agility as the name indicates.

User Experience as a concept has accrued respect in more recent times with a focus on more than just the effects of the interface. It is a comprehensive reaction of a human being to an external system, including, but not limited to the appearance of the interface in context of the time of exposure.

Typical features of user experience are user interviews, persona development, user testing, and iterative design until the optimum given time; money, business and user goals are met.

To the agile practitioner, practically speaking, user experience is a time intensive process and interferes with the basic premise of adaptive change. Performing experience exercises outside of the constructs of the Agile "sprints" would however negate the premise as well, with the experience converting it to a mini-waterfall methodology. In most Agile-UX projects, the norm is that UX must adapt to Agile and is at best tolerated by Agile practitioners.

However if you consider experience design in general; "iterative" is in-built as a concept. No design is accurate in its first avatar and iteration is mandatory in order to succeed.

A slight shift in perspective would allow product owners to have the best of both worlds with a rapidly evolving product. Lets examine how.

Solution Approach

There are a few aspects that a product team would have to honestly examine and adopt in order to make these two principles marry well and stay married.

Vision

Every good product begins with an idea; an idea to make something better. There has to be a very strong sense of what is being achieved. During the lifetime of the product, the methods to achieve this idea

may change, but the focus stays the same. Once this vision is clearly established, each piece of functionality must map back to this vision.

A clear vision lends itself to clear blocks of work - Sprints. Sprints that need to be planned for in such a way that work can be progressed on each to achieve the vision in parts and subsequently in whole. From an experience stand point, questions to be answered are: Who is this vision of? How will it be used? How do they feel, and how will we make them feel? These answers take shape in the form of personas and customer journey maps.

Foresight

Once sprints, personas and journey maps have been outlined, the product team needs time; time to absorb and plan towards the overarching goals. The development team needs time to identify the infrastructure of what is needed; and the time to map scale, stability, and incremental progression of capability. The design team works hand-in-hand to convert the journey map into tangible task flows and paths of success and failure. Putting these inputs together and optimizing determines the level of course correction required at a later point. This is what most scrum masters call Sprint 0, this time frame is truly non-negotiable. This also applies to sprint planning where you plan for subsequent sprints and course correct as appropriate.

Flexibility

Design by nature is iterative, much like Agile. This statement though redundant is worth repeating. There is no 'right' design, neither is there ever a 'complete' product. There is always the first rendition and then improvement on it until it takes on a completely different shape and size.

Agile allows for the release of the MVP (Minimum Viable Product) and then subsequent iterations to add to, polish and refine. If the first MVP failed, given the minimal time invested in it, the owner has the opportunity to re-visit the original hypothesis. However most teams devote sprints to "new functionality" with the MVP becoming the final version of the capability. Considering functionality "Done" in iteration and never returning to it, is every product team's Achilles' heel.

Consider Gmail in its first incarnation. Its skeleton is the same, an inbox, an outbox, the ability to compose and delete email. In its current state, all these features exist, but so does the ability to star emails, tag, move and search. If the team had just moved on to G+ or G drive, would there be as huge a user base? Probably not!



Validation

Another important tool in the Agile and UX box is validation via testing & reporting. User testing is crucial to weeding out both expected and unexpected surprises. The 'guerrilla' style testing is even more important than retrospective testing. The common perception of user testing involves expensive labs with business owners cringing behind a two-way mirror. This couldn't be further from the truth; quick paper prototype testing allows a design team to course correct at the speed of the iteration.

Reporting, although relegated to a last priority, analytics are telling of success or failure and providing undeniable metrics in the form of page views and click paths.



Patience

This observation is specifically for the product owner than the team. For any product there is a progressive scale of successes and failures; an even keel of milestones. It is necessary to let a product and its team go through these crests and troughs at their own pace for both a cohesive product and a united team grooming it. It is essential to appreciate both the small and big wins and allow the team to investigate and course correct. Agile and UX work hand-in-hand to bring a vision to life and it is necessary to recognize that functions like technical debt and user testing are as essential to success as is new functionality.

Benefits



A clear vision unites all members of the product team with common purpose. It is necessary to know what the building blocks are to identify the MVP at every milestone. Without this clear articulation of small and long term goals, Agile as a framework is likely to merely build a not-yet-ready version of a product that cannot be put out into the market until all "iterations" are done, defeating the purpose.

Knowing what needs to be achieved and how; is an advantage only if it allows proper planning. Planning the progression of each block and preparing for what will be needed ensures smooth progression of both development and design.



Time invested in improving a finite piece of functionality allows from a technical development standpoint, improved performance and increased scalability. From an experience standpoint, optimized task flows and user research help eliminate redundant user paths and hence user task time. The natural need to grow a product has to be tempered with the need to improve on its existing capabilities.



Failing fast and failing early is crucial to success. Again, Agile allows product teams to do just that. Putting out an MVP in two weeks, and testing on paper early on with a small sample set of users allows the design team to identify critical issues before they happen.



Conclusion

One may notice that some of the above is really applicable to all projects, and not just Agile-UX ones. That is true. However, a key difference is that Agile and UX both encourage a graceful progression of a product. Both disciplines support good structure, but also recommend tempered improvement every single time. It is only in the framework that Agile proposes that one can facilitate incremental delight to a user. In the long term, this builds credibility and makes for a successful product.

About the Author

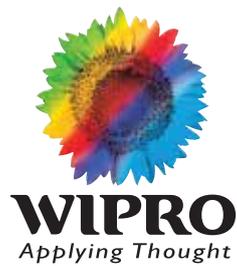
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“To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often - W. Churchill”

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