



## **Seeking a More Agile Approach: An Insurance Industry Takes a Bold Step**

By Molly Wright

In business, significant organizational change is challenging, particularly for large, well-established corporations. Change of this nature involves a substantial investment and a level of risk. Yet, with today's increasingly competitive market demanding faster, more efficient product delivery, even traditionally risk-averse businesses are making critical decisions to stay in the game.

**S**uch is the case with a major player in the insurance industry that began the transformation from a Waterfall project management method to an Agile approach in 2014 with the implementation of two successful pilot teams. When moving forward and scaling beyond these pilots required a more comprehensive approach, the company partnered with agile42 in the summer of 2015. Today, with the help of agile42's unique empir-

ical approach and trademarked tools, the company, currently with seven agile teams and more in the immediate pipeline, continues to move closer to becoming fully agile.

### **The need for change**

The company's decision to transition to an Agile project management approach began late in 2013. Research of project management options, along

with attendance at an Agile conference in June of 2014, led to contracting for three days of Agile training with a coaching company and the formation of two pilot teams. Convinced the approach was a good fit and that larger company initiatives necessitated an expansion of Agile, the company contacted agile42 in March of 2015.

Although scheduling issues prevented the two businesses from working

together the year before, the company had been impressed with agile42's unique approach. Unlike other coaching companies, agile42's **Enterprise Transition Framework™ (ETF)** offered a pathway to success, an important consideration for any company, especially one in a risk-averse industry. "ETF is an empirical change process framework where you first look at the organizational context rather than prescribing a path, then start a typical path and see the results," says Dhaval Panchal, VP of agile42 and Enterprise Agile Coach.



[More on ETF](#)

"Using ETF allows a company to make an informed judgment to continue on that path or find a slight alternative to

ultimately reach their goals."

### Evaluating current conditions

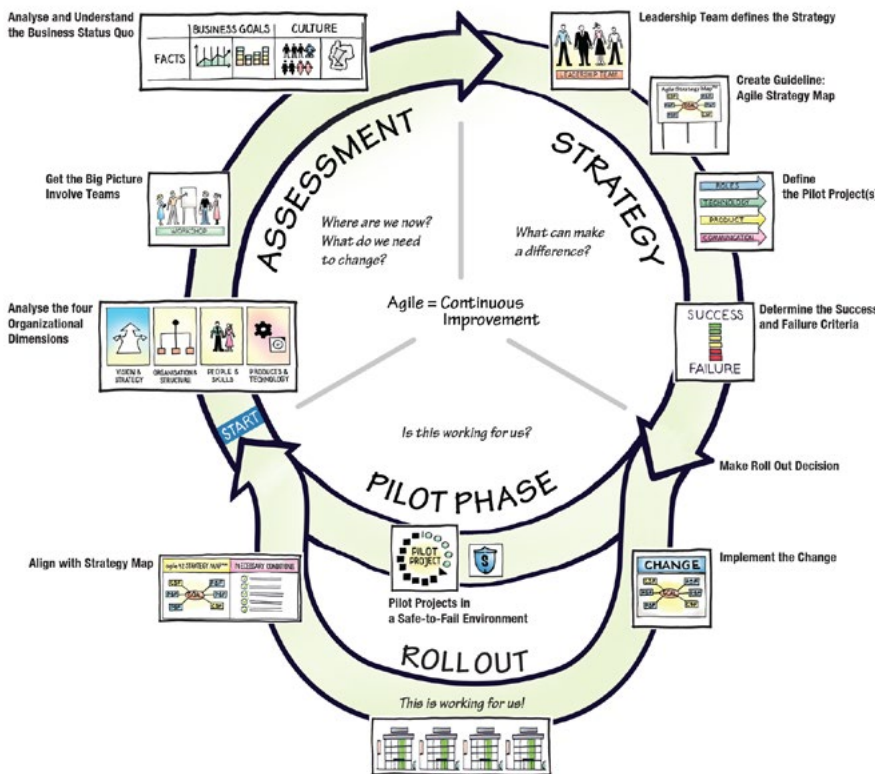
The company signed a three month contract with agile42 in April. The following month Panchal led a two day assessment, which included collecting survey and interview responses from senior level to line-workers, to create a current snapshot of the company as a whole. From there, a transition team, consisting of company employees chosen from mid-management and below, presented the assessment findings at the senior level workshop.

Assessment results revealed the company to be a strong and stable organization, with quality people, exception-

al benefits and a consistent vision of continuing responsible growth. Company culture is mostly control and reality-oriented due to strong regulatory responsibilities. Team cultures ranged from mostly control to cultivator, with some incubators for cultivating people and exploring possibilities.

Bulk responses from survey questions, especially those that focused on team agility, such as cross-functionality, team identity and iteration velocity, generally showed a low level of mastery. Interview responses offered additional insight into individual and team concerns. For instance, some employees felt an overly cautious and slow-to-change mentality hindered company advancement in today's rapidly changing insurance market. Others cited outdated facilities, including isolated cubicle workspaces and limited collaboration areas. Developers in particular, expressed frustration with excessive paperwork and processes, and system issues such as, dated software required to support legacy applications and gaps in technology that wasted considerable time and manpower.

However, the primary concern of survey participants was a lack of communication between IT and the business partners stemming from the company's Waterfall approach to product management. A programmer/analyst with the company described the process in this way: "The business partners meet with the tech people for a few meetings and hammer out some specs. Then six months later, they throw this pig over the wall to the busi-



Enterprise Transition Framework™ (ETF)



ness partners saying, 'Here's what you asked for.' More often than not, the business people say, 'What is this?'"

For developers, this situation placed the majority of project tasks on IT, creating a highly stressful environment. "For the most part, you set up the meetings, all the project management, paperwork, analysis, coding and testing," says a developer who has been with the company for 10 years. Stress levels intensify when a developer gets stuck and has to wait for assistance from a colleague focused on other work. In turn, this can lead to project delays, strained relationships and trust issues with business partners, who question whether products will be delivered according to original specifications and in a timely manner. Based on the assessment, agile42 suggested several recommendations, including:

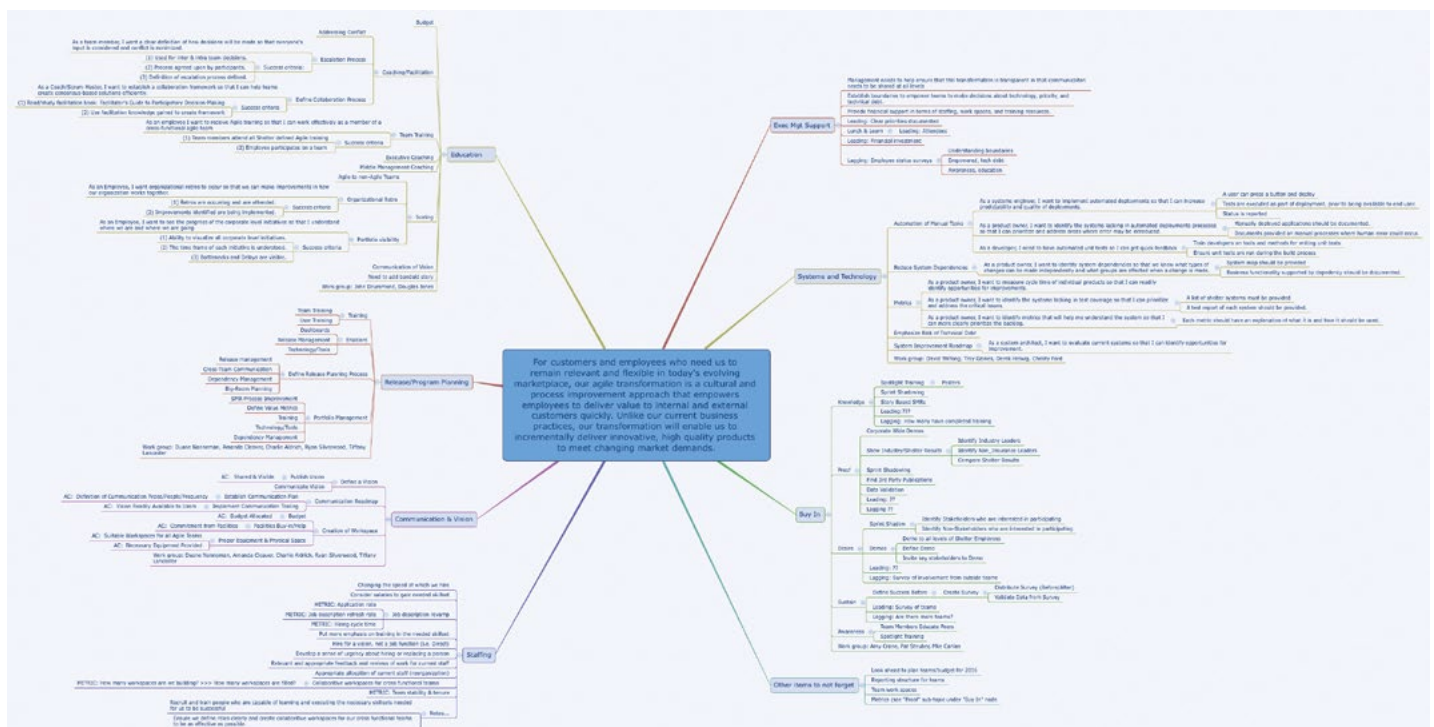
- Strengthen existing Agile practices by focusing on demonstrable ownership of technical quality, self-organization and continual learning
- Institute long-term project visions and roadmaps with estimate budgeting and empirical process control
- Establish "fit for purpose" into prioritization and trade-off discussions and decision-making through lean canvasses and fitness criteria

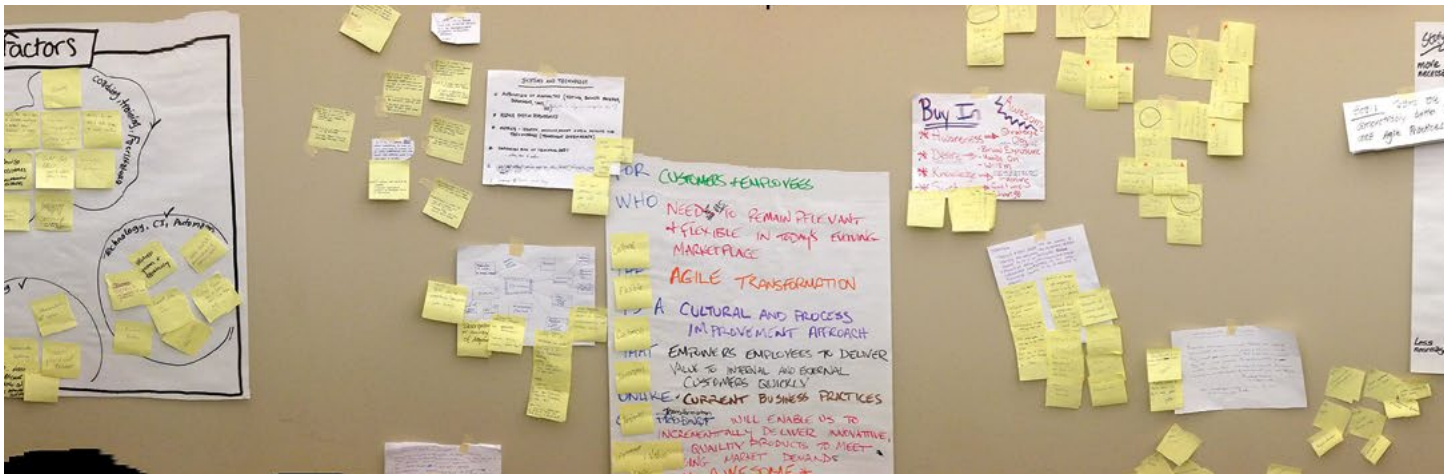
Immediately following the assessment, agile42 began the Strategic Planning phase. Under the guidance of Panchal, the company's aforementioned transition team outlined the company's journey by utilizing an agile42 organizational change tool called the **Agile Strategy Map™**. Combining the in-

sights of the assessment with the business goals, the **Agile Strategy Map™** process allowed the company to envision and identify the success criteria necessary to move forward today and ultimately become more agile in the future.

### Learning the process

Following a two-week break to allow the executive team time to work on action items identified from the strategy session, agile42 returned to facilitate separate training and chartering sessions for both the product owners and the team members. This was to ensure each group understood the agile approach, journey and benefits from their unique perspectives. Team members included developers and testers, while business members included the entire eco-system involved with the teams that were chartered to go agile. This in-





### Agile Strategy Map Session

cluded: stakeholders, operations people, managers/supervisors and project managers. Combined, more than 60 employees participated in these events.

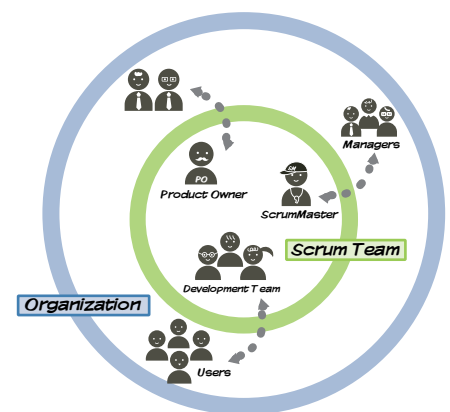
“The agile42 training is unique in that it doesn’t dictate how to do agile,” says an actuarial systems administrator for the insurance company and product owner for one of the policy teams. “Rather it provides you with purposeful tools to allow you to create the agile framework under which each individual team can work. It’s like the difference between giving you plans for building a birdhouse or giving you the tools and vision for building a birdhouse. The first will lead to everyone building the same birdhouse, which may or may not meet the future needs of the customer. The second allows for the vision to change and adapt to the individual customer’s needs, as well as allowing the team to determine how to work together.”

Product owner training concentrated on working with real products, followed by two days of product chartering to establish product vision, roadmap, User Story Maps and building

initial product backlog. This foundation allows products owners to provide newly launched teams with a clear understanding of the work that needed to be done and the level of priority per task. Team training, followed by a day of team chartering, focused on agile practices while also addressing the importance of rituals. For example, in regards to Sprint Planning, although product owners bring the work, it is the team’s responsibility to say what they can commit to actually doing. “The goal is to establish an agreement between the team and the product owner about what kind of value can be delivered in the next two weeks,” says agile42 coach and team facilitator, Daniel Lynn. Similarly, paying attention to how the stakeholders interact with the product and really listening to their feedback during the Sprint Review opens the door to improved relationships and better feedback in the future. “A big thing in Agile is continuous improvement,” says Lynn. “So, we know we are not perfect and that’s fine and we are just going to make small steps forward.”

Overall, because agile teams built for

the long haul, team training focused on the importance of building and maintaining strong, cohesive groups that thrive in co-located areas. For instance, one way the teams set the groundwork for successful interactions was by establishing group norms. “One of our norms is there are no electronics during the meetings and that includes your own personal computer, unless it’s required, like when we need to look at code,” says an IT analyst with company for eight years. He adds this rule is particularly beneficial during Stand Ups when all eyes need to be focused on the person talking.



Scrum Communication Flow

## Putting training into practice

Following training and chartering, the company launched their first Sprint and coaching began in earnest. For the next several weeks, agile42 coaches supported the teams through three Sprints. Teaching Scrum Masters the management skills to nurture and sustain the teams along the way, coaches continued to assist product owners in creating a prioritized backlog of work, while setting clear expectations of delivery. With timely filings with the state required in this industry, a definitive timeline for delivery is essential.

Coaches additionally encouraged teams to think outside the box and customize their agile journey. As a result, several Scrum Masters formed a Guild, which meets weekly to discuss team issues and share solutions. "We're trying to encourage a similar guild for product owners," says a Scrum Master speaking for the group.

As part of agile42's **Team Coaching Framework™ (TCF)** all team members received access to online coaching resources. Solutions to common challenges or "coaching cards," submitted by team members of other national and international companies agile42 has trained, provide possible resolutions to issues. On the flip side, team members from the insurance company can also submit cards. Tools



[More on TCF](#)

from the tool library as well as ones attached to individual cards by agile coaches deliver ad-

ditional insight and support. No other coaching company offers this type of extended coaching.

## Promising results and beneficial change

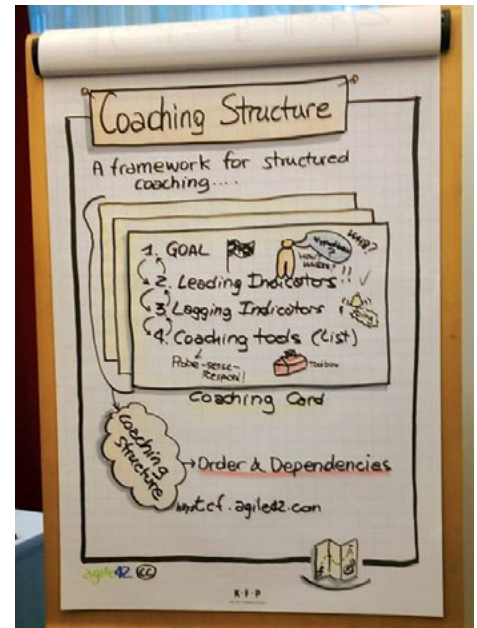
Near the end of the engagement, agile42 conducted a second assessment survey and compared the results with the first. With the bulk of responses now in the "practicing" level or moving toward mastery, the coaching company is pleased with the results. "More than the average itself, which has the potential to be influenced by a variety of factors, that movement in responses tells us that teams are making the improvements we are working toward," says Lynn.

Company employees involved with the transition echo this positive change.

"The ease of communication in a collaborative space, frequent feedback from users, and the deep sense of team connection all have contributed to my enjoyment of the experience," says a company IT analyst and scrum master.

"We have vendors that are excited to work with us now because we are agile. I don't think we could keep up with technology if we hadn't made the transition to the new style," says a company product owner.

Developers credit Agile for improved relationships in the workplace. "We have seen success, not just through things we have delivered, but through meetings and conversations with the business side. We not only get to in-



**Coaching Structure**

teract with them on a more personal basis through some of our grooming meetings and testing and things we have incorporated with the process of Agile, but just seeing them be excited about it and buying in. It's just night and day from how we interacted with Waterfall," says a developer employed by the company for 10 years. Another feels adopting the Agile approach has increased trust between IT and the business partners. "The process really lends itself to turning around problems for them quicker. Instead of waiting for three months for something, maybe we can turn it around in two weeks," he says.

Overall, employees involved with the company transition say they appreciate agile42's committed coaching staff. "I felt that agile42 had a powerful combination of real world experience working directly with Agile, extensive experience helping other companies with their transitions, keen business sense, and sensitive communication



skills that really made an impact. They had a clear understanding of the business environment in the insurance industry and at our company specifically, which allowed them to tailor their recommendations to what would actually work for us, not what would happen in some idealized world,” says one IT analyst.

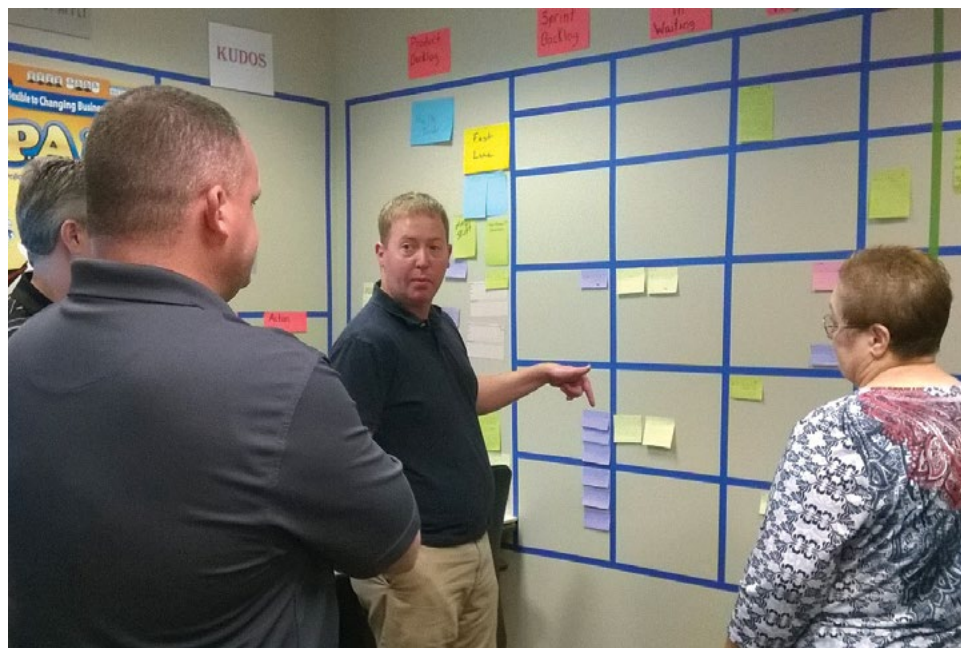
A product owner for the company’s customer service Agile team believes the dedication of the coaches provided the springboard for her team’s success. “They would listen and advise us as we worked on our own, which made it very easy to continue after they were gone. The sessions where our team documented our Definition of Ready, and Definition of Done and our goals was the most beneficial, because otherwise I am not sure we ever would have done it. Now I see the value in it.”

### Keeping the wheels of change in motion

With seven agile teams operating successfully, the company is definitely headed in the right direction. Of course, challenges still exist. Many agile team members still have previously assigned products to complete, which

can slow the transitioning process. Of equal concern for the company is carving out team workspaces in the current facilities. Currently, the two original pilot teams occupy a co-located environment, while other teams are temporarily housed in spare offices and meeting rooms. Further, future plans to develop dedicated team rooms have been put on hold until Facilities projects that are currently in process are finished. Overall, with several hundred employees in the IT department alone, it will take time for the insurance company to become fully agile. Yet, according to a programmer/analyst who has

been with the company for more than a dozen years, the change is welcomed and worth the effort. “Now that people have gotten a taste of it, it would be hard to go back to Waterfall. It just makes sense.”



## About agile42:



agile42 offers training and coaching of agile methods to organizations of all sizes and from all industries. Providing proven practices and trademarked tools, agile42 enables companies to find solutions and optimize processes for continuous improvement. With coaches across the globe, agile42 is the only agile coaching company that can deliver a consistent coaching experience throughout an entire organization, recognizing and supporting different time zones and cultural diversity.



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website