Why A Slow Start Doesn’t Signal Failure Any More Than a Fast Start Guarantees Long-Term Success
**A Tale of Two Teams & Two Times: Case Study**

**Engagement Type**
Agile Launch

**The Challenge**
Implement Agile in an organization that had tried once and failed in an effort to rekindle the spark of innovation that made them a success in the first place.

**The Goal**
Regain market share, increase innovation, and boost employee retention.

**The SolutionsIQ Solution**
- Assess the current situation and rally leadership around an organization-wide change roadmap.
- Design a plan leveraging Scrum, XP, Lean Startup and other change approaches and techniques and begin execution.
- Start sprinting with pilot teams.
- Adjust the plan as needed, scale out small successes, and offer recommendations toward sustaining results.
- Help client initiate culture shifts throughout the organization.

**Delivery**
- Successfully launched 15 Agile teams.
- Helped client rediscover a passion for innovation and cultivated it throughout the organization.
- Reduced the delivery cycle, in one case helping the team deliver 13 times faster than their typical delivery time!

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**Just the Facts**

**Industry**
Travel

**Number of Employees**
250-1K

**Length of Engagement**
> 1 Year

**Number of Coaches**
2

**People Served**
15

What once had taken six months to go live was being released... every two weeks.
Abstract

A travel services client asked SolutionsIQ to help them implement Agile in hopes that it would hasten a return to the energy and excitement of the boom times. Our coaches began with two pilot teams. The first team rocketed through the launch, while the second struggled to escape the gravity of the status quo. Through a series of in-depth conversations and calculated adjustments, our Agile coaches were able to help the second team take off. Soon the second team had surpassed the one that had taken to Agile so easily. Meanwhile, the company experienced greatly improved release times and found ways to save millions of dollars through streamlining and automation.

Overview

Imagine being part of a startup. Your product is revolutionary, the company’s enthusiasm is contagious, and every person’s contribution is essential for success. Now picture that same startup ten years later. Inertia has settled in, competitors have crowded the market, and the innovation that used to come so easily is buried under the weight of bureaucracy and complacency.

That was the situation at our client, a travel services organization. They had burst onto the scene some years back and created a huge following very quickly. Times were good and spirits and profits were high. It wasn’t long, though, before upstart competitors began offering similar services with a few more bells and whistles. Eventually, the company found itself lagging behind and struggling to stay relevant. Though our client still retained some loyal customers, they had no new groundbreaking features to offer. All of the infectious energy from days past had disappeared, and it seemed that staff were just showing up, putting in their forty hours, and going home. Those who still hungered for a chance to make a difference were leaving for new adventures.

The leadership team wanted to reignite the creativity that they knew their people were capable of channeling, but they hadn’t yet found the right spark. Although the leaders were certain Agile could make a difference, a previous experiment with Scrum had failed, so they were struggling to get the rest of the organization to buy in. Meanwhile, the company continued to experience declining market shares and high employee turnover. That’s when they called SolutionsIQ for help.
Discover & Plan

The engagement began with conversations. Our Agile coaches took the time to speak with nearly everyone in the office, in the process learning a great deal about each person’s view of Agile, the current situation, and how things could improve. These one-on-one dialogs also allowed everyone at the client to get to know and begin to trust us.

The initial assessment revealed a company struggling with buy-in for a top-down Agile transformation and teams buried under the weight of too many concurrent projects. It also showed team members with varied levels of Agile understanding, from almost no knowledge to a little formal training to actual experience on an Agile team. Through these conversations, we established a working relationship with the team members. SolutionsIQ’s coaches were also able to demonstrate the strong support this initiative had from management, and to explain what the coaches’ role would be in the effort.

With the help of the leadership team, the coaches chose two teams to serve as pilot teams. These teams were working on capabilities that accounted for nearly 50% of the company’s revenue, so any improvements we made would have a very visible and immediate impact. Our coaches also understood that any mistakes would be similarly amplified. It was a test of the coaches, of Agile as a process, and of the dedication and abilities of the two pilot teams.

Start

Both teams received training in the form of an Agile Foundations class, plus direct coaching in all the activities necessary to get started sprinting. Together with the coaches, the teams created their initial Product Backlogs, worked out team agreements, including a Definition of Done, and settled into their new roles. That’s where the similarities stopped.

“[Our] coach didn’t help us make this happen from a pulpit. He truly coached us through it so that it would be genuine, so that it would stick... He rolled up his sleeves and helped us get started.”

After just two Sprints, it was clear that one team was handling the transition to Agile remarkably well while the other was still thrashing. The first team was delivering more each Sprint, had a steadily rising velocity, and was able to identify and make impactful improvements. They were a shining example of how well Scrum and Agile
Game Changer: Mindset Shift

One of the teams had tried to do Agile “right” but failed to thrive. Through focused discussions with our coaches, the team realized that they were so afraid of making mistakes that it was playing “not to lose.” Once the team let go of this fear and embraced change, it took off and never looked back.

Our coaches also helped the client’s management and leadership change their mindset about the autonomy of their delivery teams. Because this particular team was afraid to fail, they didn’t strive to succeed. We helped everyone throughout the organization recognize that failure is just one step toward potential success. The key is to fail fast, learn from your mistakes, and continually drive toward success. With enough perseverance and a little bit of guidance and luck, success is a matter of odds.

could work. The other team continued to struggle. Though our Agile coaches cautioned management not to compare the teams’ velocities, it was clear that the trendlines for Team B were headed in the wrong direction. They had yet to deliver anything and were just not coming together as a unit.

SolutionsIQ’s coaches and the client’s management team were at a loss as to why one team would be performing so much better than the other, when they had both started with similar training and skills. As the pattern continued, management quickly grew frustrated and began to wonder if they should consider replacing certain team members. After all, they reasoned, both teams were using the same process, so the problem must be the people on the struggling team. Our coaches felt strongly that the people on both teams were equally capable and asked for some leeway to discover the true root of the problem.

Reflect & Redesign

During the next retrospective, our coaches sat down with the struggling team for a frank discussion. The team revealed that it felt tremendous pressure from management, as if every action was under a microscope and that any mistake would be held against them. They also felt overshadowed by the more successful team and felt they weren’t receiving enough attention from SolutionsIQ coaches or from management.

The SolutionsIQ coaches listened and promised the team that from that point forward, their chief goal would be to help the team get better. They then challenged the team to help discover a path forward — to find the things that were in their control and do those things. After some consideration, the team identified three things they needed in order to
improve:

» Formal training in Lean startup and technical practices
» Concrete ways to improve quality
» A better understanding of the desired features

They also admitted to needing to change their mindset. They were living in fear of making mistakes, of taking risks. It was like playing not to lose, instead of playing to win. They wanted instead to simultaneously take control and let loose.

This seemed an epiphany for the team and for the organization as a whole. Our coaches gave the team the training they asked for: a Lean Startup workshop and technical training. We also worked with management to reduce the pressure the team felt from company leadership. We reminded management to praise the good things—and when they saw problems, to be a catalyst for change.

As for the team, they stopped fighting against the change and began to take advantage of the many benefits of Agile, using it to make a real impact. The team started to focus on delivering the Minimum Marketable Product (MMF) — to make the most functional delivery rather than the most beautiful one. They learned to let go and make complete incremental releases after each two-week Sprint, rather than holding releases back to make them perfect.

The team also changed how it talked with customers, relying less on prototypes and more on working software, which gave the team real data and more valuable feedback. The team tested and validated new ideas with real customers. The team also instituted virtual sandboxes for a customer segment; real functionality that, if well received, could be turned on for everyone.
Scale

Soon it was time to scale our learning and experience with the pilot teams to the larger organization. Our coaches had 15 teams total to train up using a similar inspect-and-adapt approach to training and coaching. Teams shared lessons and practices with each other, accelerating each other’s learning. The leadership team continued their catalytic approach to problem solving by pulling people together to discover solutions rather than over-analyzing any particular team. And the team that had been slow to start? By the time our coaches left, that team was considered the epitome of Agile success at the client and was the go-to team for coaching and mentoring others.

Results

The organization started to see some stunning turnarounds. Feature release improved greatly: what once had taken six months to go live was being released quarterly, then monthly, and then every two weeks.

Another success came from a few teams that were working on a software module designed to capture data from vendors and suppliers. When these teams started out, it took months to onboard a new vendor. As the teams built the system incrementally, they exposed inefficiencies and errors. With each new increment, they were able to shave steps off the process. They estimated that streamlining the data collection and automating the process saved them $1M per vendor!

Sustain

One of the biggest benefits of moving to an Agile process is the constant emphasis on delivery. Releasing new products and enhancements to the customer gives everyone a realistic picture of what’s working and what’s not. It increases team morale and pushes everyone to look for ways to improve and to innovate. We might have started with two distinct times (before and after) and two contrasting teams, but we left the client with 15 Agile teams running in multiple countries toward one goal: creating the right product, at the right time, for the right budget. In the end, that’s the only goal that really matters.

By working incrementally, we exposed inefficiencies and errors in the process. Streamlining the data collection and automating the process saved us about $1M per vendor!
Big Wins

» Feature release times improved from an average of six months to two weeks
» Streamlining and automation saved $1M per vendor
» Team and company morale improved as innovation and creativity increased
» A team that had struggled with Agile became the model for success

Want to be the next success story? Contact us now to learn more about how SolutionsIQ can guide your Agile transformation!

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DISCLAIMER: The engagement on which this case study is based was performed by BigVisible Solutions. SolutionsIQ, Inc., formally acquired BigVisible Solutions in December 2014.