SolutionsIQ
Modeling Agile Behavior
Case Study

How Focusing Too Much on the Solution is Sometimes the Problem
Abstract

When SolutionsIQ arrived, the client, an insurance company with 250,000 employees, was struggling to make Agile work. One team in particular was having difficulties such that the end customer was threatening to choose a new vendor. By working as the team’s Product Owner for a series of sprints, our Agile expert was able to model how to converse and collaborate with the customer to define the problem without getting hung up on any proposed solutions. Through close collaboration, we helped the client brainstorm solutions that would help the client reach a resolution to the actual problem. The outcome was working software that truly fulfilled the end customer’s needs. By the end of the engagement, the team in question had seen what Agile looked like in action and how it could be put to work for them.

Overview

Sometimes circumstances conspire to interfere with the best of intentions. That was the case at this insurance client: having researched solutions to the problem they were facing, the delivery team had latched onto a solution they were certain would work. The customer wasn’t so confident, especially given that this was our client’s first Agile project and the fact that the insurance company was having difficulty finding a qualified Product Owner for the Scrum team. The customer simply didn’t know how to even exactly how to describe them to the client’s delivery team, let alone prioritize their needs. When the client brought SolutionsIQ in, the end customer was so dissatisfied, they were threatening to seek out a different vendor. Our Agile expert stepped in to serve as Product Owner, modeling Agile behaviors such as close collaboration, clear communication, and Lean design thinking to show both the client and their customer how sometimes focusing on the foregone solution can be an obstacle to resolving the actual problem.
The Solution

The client recognized the team’s need for a strong, consistent Product Owner. Acting as Product Owner, SolutionsIQ’s Agile expert resolved to reset the team and customer’s planning mindset. Instead of approaching the customer with a list of potential features and a request to prioritize that list, our Product Owner asked a series of questions aimed at discovering the problem that the software intended to resolve, how it should help, and why the current solutions were not working. For example, this particular product was intended primarily to help streamline patient intake for nurses. The team had set up customer meetings with a set of these nurses—a positive step towards interacting directly with the end users. Unfortunately, the nurses felt they were being asked to do work beyond outside their job description, such as defining and prioritizing features. They were frustrated, confused and failed to see how the process would help them in the end.

Prior to the planning meeting, the nurses had created a list of desired features for one of their patient intake screens. The list was very detailed, explaining exactly what information should be on the screen, where, and in what order. Rather than create stories

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based on these detailed requirements, the Product Owner put the list aside. He asked the customer what the most important piece of information on the screen was—what they needed to know more than anything else. The nurses didn’t even need to think about it before answering: “We need to know if a patient has an active allergy to latex.” The team then started discussing with the nurses ways they could highlight that information so that it was very visible. Perhaps they could use a flashing icon. The resulting conversation yielded a completely different Product Backlog than had been created in previous planning meetings. This was the first of several collaborative conversations between the Product Owner, the team, and the customer. The process was a breakthrough for them.

To illustrate, the requirements prioritized for the next sprint concerned creating drop-down menus for patient medications. Instead of taking the nurses’ list of requirements and asking them to prioritize them, our Product Owner and client team asked the nurses more about what they were trying to accomplish with the drop-down menus. The response: “We need a way to quickly document a patient’s medication history and determine which ones the patient is still taking.” Putting aside the foregone solution (i.e., the dropdown menus), the team began to work side by side with nurses, using quick sketches of solutions that would accomplish the same goal and also save time. The nurses were able to see the possibilities and to give immediate feedback to clarify needs and potential obstacles. The resulting software reduced the time spent on the medication intake screen from 4-5 minutes to 10-15 seconds. That time savings, multiplied by 25 patients a day, was significant—and exciting for the customer and the team alike. For the first time, the customer had working software that met their actual needs.

The customer, who had been threatening to switch vendors, was now actively contributing to the delivery of the product. The beleaguered team was starting to gain momentum and receiving positive feedback on its efforts. As nurses from competing hospitals began to share their stories with the team during planning meetings, they not only created better software solutions but also better working relationships with each other. The entire atmosphere had changed from one of competition and conflict, to one of collaboration and community.
Big Wins

» End users received software that met their actual needs, at a fraction of the time and cost.

» Coaching and instruction modeled by a SolutionsIQ expert improved the client’s understanding of Scrum Product Ownership.

» Collaboration and community are now core to the client’s problem-solving approach that doesn’t focus on a foregone solution.

» After seeing value, the end customer’s disappointment turned into excitement and enthusiasm.

Want to be the next success story?

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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.

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