



Agile Innovation and Employee Experience

By Marcus Stallworth

How to apply Agile principles to create a better employee experience.



Google the words “agile” and “innovation,” and the results will yield no shortage of strategies to bring better value to your customer. Most of the time Agile and innovation are referenced, it’s to the customer’s focus and benefit. And rightfully so: “Sales cures all ills,” or so the theory goes. But does it really?

The phrase “Sales cures all ills” highlights how stakeholders are willing to overlook internal mishaps and failed plans because a sale is the ultimate satisfier and indicator of success. However, behind those failed plans and internal mishaps is usually a growing buzz of dissatisfaction from the employees and business partners who drive customer value and satisfaction.

Agile innovation is often confused with throwing spaghetti against the wall daily and hoping some of what sticks is innovative. However, those of us who really love Agile know that it means frequently asking and listening to ideate fast, fail fast, fail forward, and ultimately deliver wins quicker with full transparency along the way. What’s most exciting about Agile is that each delivered win is promptly followed by a “What’s next?,” and any new need can trump a previously submitted one.

It’s no secret that the traditional way of listening quarterly or annually only to go off and build and release an untested solution in isolation is dying. Now, instead of waiting until the end of a project to realize that the end product doesn’t meet the customer’s needs,

there are constant, short showcases that allow all stakeholders to provide feedback and input that will innovate the end result. While Agile may seem like the Wild, Wild West to some, its growing popularity and success show that it’s a way to ensure that issues are discovered and managed before becoming project-derailing catastrophes. It allows for product innovation through team brainstorming that welcomes all ideas throughout the project, not solely at the beginning or end of the project when they’re too late to be helpful. Just as importantly, Agile is a way to build with the customer and across teams, resulting in better communication, transparency, and performance.

So why not use the same approaches that

Agile provides — such as Scrum and Crystal — but aim them inward toward the employee? This combination of employee experience and Agile delivery can benefit your business in a number of key ways, including increasing employee engagement and reducing employee turnover. Improving your employee experience program and projects with the use of Agile delivery is, fortunately, not difficult to implement. However, supercharging your employee experience program and outcomes is not something that your organization can afford to pass on given the growing importance of the topic and growing voice of employees due to new tools and the social political landscape.

Applying Agile Innovation to Employee Experience

This is not the first business discipline to merge with Agile. There are already articles and guides on how to apply Agile principles with OCM, business development, and marketing. What's different here is the fact that employee experience is in the midst of a reemergence, being redefined¹ from the bounds of an employee exit survey to a holistic employee experience journey that is matured and improved through frameworks, programs, and intentional effort. As of early 2021, there is no prevailing framework or core tenets of employee experience. And while there are some suggestions to how organizations should approach an employee experience strategy, many have begun creating their strategies by listening to their employees and brainstorming on what to implement first.

In general, the first step of applying Agile to employee experience is to understand its core principles and how they lend themselves to employee experience, which most of the time is as simple as replacing “customer” with “employee.” Beyond that, a good starting point is to review each Agile principal and ask questions about how it could apply to your employee experience approach.

Applying Agile to employee experience means reimagining Agile principles for each employee and the core internal tools and processes that serve and support them in their jobs. Refocusing from the customer to the employee is the first major change required to focus Agile toward producing more engaged and happy employees versus “got-to-have” product and customer reviews. In short, applying Agile to the employee experience means “applying methodologies to better engage with each employee relative to their growth, relationships, autonomy, fairness, well-being and security² through iterative, consistent, frequent and collaborative value delivery.”

AGILE PRINCIPLES

Satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery.

Face-to-face communication over written communication.

Capitalize on change by welcoming changing requirements, even late in development.

Working solutions (accepted by the end user) are the primary measure of success.

Deliver value frequently, preferably every few weeks (mitigate risks, faster feedback, driving the next wave of value); don't go more than a few months without adding new value.

Agile processes promote sustainable development that can progress at the same pace indefinitely.

Build around motivated team members, with appropriate support, and trust them to get the job done.

Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.

The business and developers work together daily throughout the project; better communication and better meeting of expectations; transparency and fluency.

At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

Simplicity—the art of maximizing the amount of work not done—is essential; useful solutions that do a few things extraordinarily well are better than an all-encompassing, complex and hard-to-sustain solution.

The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams that find their own work, manage their associated responsibilities and timelines, and consistently experiment and move forward without waiting for a manager to chart the path ahead.



CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE APPLICATION

How do we currently satisfy our employees through early and continuous improvement?	What are some other systematic changes we can make to bring value and improvement to our employees faster and more regularly?
Rating ourselves from 1 to 5, how often do we have face-to-face communication versus written communication when it comes to critical and noncritical communication points in the employee's journey?	Do we know all of the critical communication points in an employee's journey? If so, how many of them are face to face? How many can we convert to face to face at scale?
How can we capitalize on change by welcoming the input that comes from focusing on and valuing diversity and inclusion?	
How much do you engage employees in the development of solutions that impacts their employee experience?	Are there any opportunities for employee feedback and acceptance prior to launch of a new solution?
What governance do you have to ensure that employee experience is being improved frequently?	How are you determining what is improved next?
Have you found your current employee experience efforts to be sustainable? If no, what makes each of those efforts unsustainable? And what were their outcomes?	With the current way your internal teams and processes are structured, could you deliver new value and improvements to the employee experience every few weeks? Would this pace cause any unintentional consequences?
Does your current team and leadership understand employee experience beyond the bare minimum to retain employees?	Is there currently a designated leader driving to world-class employee experience, or someone who has shown interest?
What quality assurance measures do you have in place for all aspects of the employee experience (everything from HR processes to productivity tools)?	Do you currently have standards by which employee experience (proposed and in-place) elements are measured?
How often are employees engaged in the projects to improve employee experience? What roles do they have? How much does their feedback influence what's decided and implemented?	On a scale of 1 to 5, how would you rate your transparency in improving the overall employee experience and specific projects to improve employee experience?
How often does the team responsible for directly impacting the employee's experience review its strategy, programs, and performance?	How long does it currently take to implement feedback and improvement opportunities from these reviews?
Do you have core attributes that describe your employee experience? Are your employees saying that the current programs and tools in place reflect those core attributes?	Do you have core elements of your employee experience that are highly leveraged and maximized?
How was your employee experience team developed? How many of the members on it volunteered?	Does your employee experience team often need direction on what to do next, or a lot of oversight to continue forward progress?

What Benefits Can You Expect?

If you focus on improving the employee experience collaboratively, more quickly, and consistently, what can you expect? While the short answer may be a happier employee, that may not be enough to convince your leadership to make a shift in their strategy toward improving employee experience. That said, here are a few more benefits that you can expect by applying Agile to your employee experience strategy and program:

<p>Better Employee Engagement and Relationships Holding true to the principles of Agile will yield better engagement and relationships between teams across the internal organization through frequent communication and collaboration.</p>	<p>Improved ROI The rapid release of working capabilities and solutions reduces the discontent with large and long internal improvement efforts and produces improvements in employee experience KPIs faster, with less investment of time and resources.</p>
<p>FTE Time Savings and Efficiency Evaluating high-use experience components by asking “How can we make this better for the employee?” and optimizing internal processes and teams to bring value faster and more quickly will result in quicker (less steps and time taken) transactions, resulting in greater engagement.</p>	<p>Faster Learning and Adjusting A lot of evidence shows that adopting Agile approaches and mindsets helps employees and teams learn faster, uncover the results of major improvement efforts more quickly, and create opportunities for teams to abandon bad paths as soon as they are recognized.</p>
<p>Responsive, Resilient, and Adaptive Organization Quickly improving and considering new ways of improving the employee experience will ultimately lead to new tools, leaner processes, and a more responsive, resilient, and adaptive employee experience team.</p>	<p>Reduced Improvement Debt Furthermore, just as organizations have reduced or better managed the technical debt created with a well-designed, mature implementation of Agile, the same can be done when focusing on the employee, whether it be related to technology or any other initiative.</p>



Agile allows for product innovation through team brainstorming that welcomes all ideas throughout the project.

The First Step in Your Employee Experience Agile Transformation

Just like with Agile delivery, applying Agile to employee experience will look different for every organization. There are many factors that drive how it takes shape, but one of the more critical factors is assessing your employee experience team's Agile maturity across the following key capability areas:

1. Planning and Strategy
2. Process and Governance
3. Organization and People
4. Culture and Communication
5. Technology and Tools
6. Metrics

By assessing your organization's Agile maturity, you will gain an understanding of your organization's Agile strengths and opportunities that will highlight a path forward for implementing Agile in your employee experience program. Your assessment will produce a roadmap for the organization that will include value outputs such as:

1. Quick win improvement opportunities to address immediate needs.
2. Maturity levels across employee experience functions.
3. Long-term initiatives to improve employee engagement and delivery processes.
4. Tailored change management approach for gaining buy-in from affected groups when implementing proposed initiatives.
5. Fresh HCM/change management lens to your program.
6. Reality versus perception/what's happening versus what you think is happening.
7. Realigned initiatives to strategic goals vision of the company.

Once a roadmap is developed, your organization will take each opportunity and design how to move forward with an Agile approach. Once implemented and running, your organization can expect to experience the outcomes and benefits mentioned above, in

increasing magnitude with each passing sprint.

If you are already using Agile or employee experience initiatives within your organization, then you will already have some of the pieces needed to get started. Specifically, momentum in bolstering employee engagement, deepening buy-in, and having a stable, flexible program structure are all essential to success. The overall goal is to use agile to transform your organization into a place your employees remark that they "get to work at" rather than a place they "have to work at." 

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Sources:

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2. <https://journal.jabian.com/exploring-the-dynamics-of-employee-engagement/>