

Remote Startup Success

From Firefighting to Results

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Case Study

Summary: Remote Startup Success - From Firefighting to Results

Arundhati Dutta paired with a newly formed remote startup to embark on a journey to adopt Agile methodologies. The hope was that the startup would enhance their product development and operational efficiency. Altogether, the team consisted of five full-stack developers, one Scrum Master who also handled customer support, a part-time UX designer, and two founders (CEO and COO) who contributed to product development, sales, and marketing efforts. Despite their commitment to Agile and Scrum, they faced multiple challenges, leading to a lack of productivity and burnout.

Challenges

Initially, the challenges that this startup faced centered around the team's structure, work processes, and communication dynamics. These challenges resulted in lack of efficiency, burnout, and an absence of a clear product development strategy.

Lack of Product Ownership and Prioritization

To start, the absence of a [Product Owner](#) was one of the most significant challenges that this remote startup faced. At first, the CEO was operating as an informal Product Owner, routinely sending feature requests via email to the team with no structured prioritization. Overall, this led to a lack of focus and reactive workflows. Without a dedicated individual to prioritize and manage the [backlog](#), the team pulled work based on immediate availability rather than a strategic roadmap.

Reactive Work Environment

With no prioritized backlog, the team frequently responded to ad-hoc requests from the CEO. These included sudden changes in design or requests to complete a feature by a tight deadline, only for that feature to be abandoned before deployment. To be sure, this constant firefighting mode left the developers feeling demoralized and fatigued. Often, there was no sense of steady progress or accomplishment, as many features that the team worked on were later deemed unnecessary or incomplete.

Unstructured Sprint Process

Formerly, the team operated in three-week [Sprints](#), but there was no clear structure or adherence to Sprint goals. Unsurprisingly, at the end of these Sprints, they often lacked a demo-able product increment. The CEO and COO rarely attended [Sprint Reviews](#). Consequently, instead of serving their intended purpose, Sprint Reviews became task inventories rather than a reflection of value delivered to customers. As a result, there was no accountability for delivering finished, shippable product increments.

Delayed Decision-Making and Feedback Loops

Additionally, lack of participation by leadership in Sprint Reviews routinely delayed critical feedback. Even when the team completed a feature, they were unsure if it was ready for release because the CEO would sometimes send additional changes after the Sprint. Undeniably, this uncertainty led to extended development cycles and a lack of confidence in product releases.

Communication Gaps and Lack of Team Cohesion

This remote startup team operated entirely virtually, relying primarily on transactional communication through Google Hangouts. While they regularly discussed tasks and progress, there was little personal connection or teamwork, and they were feeling the effects. In addition, the lack of Daily Scrums exacerbated the communication problem. The [Scrum Master](#) mentioned to Arundhati that the team didn't see the value in conducting Daily Scrums; they felt they already knew what everyone was working on. Unquestionably, this absence of regular check-ins led to misalignment and further siloed working practices.

Sprint Retrospectives and Continuous Improvement

Further, the team either neglected or half-heartedly conducted Sprint Retrospectives. Up until now, they didn't view retrospectives as valuable, leading to minimal continuous improvement. On occasion, they conducted retrospectives but felt that the effort didn't produce tangible results. To this end, without regular reflection on their process, the team continued to repeat the same mistakes, further demotivating them as time went on.

Design Bottlenecks

The UX designer worked part-time, causing frequent delays in the delivery of user experience designs. As a result, developers often had to wait for design inputs before proceeding with development. Without a doubt, this bottleneck slowed down product progress and extended the overall Sprint cycle.

Ineffective Estimation and Planning

The team used rough hour-based estimations rather than [story points](#), which frequently led to inaccuracies in their planning. The CEO had an expectation that these estimates would be precise, but the reality of Agile development is that estimates are often variable. The inability to meet these expectations resulted in frustration and tension between leadership and the development team. The developers also felt disempowered to communicate the uncertainty inherent in estimation.

Leadership Stretch

Without question, the CEO had increasingly limited capacity. Besides acting as an informal Product Owner, he was handling everything from fundraising to sales partnerships, in addition to managing the developers. His lack of time to focus on product development contributed to the ad-hoc work requests, absence in key Scrum ceremonies, and lack of a long-term product vision. The COO, while involved in marketing and sales, had minimal interaction with the development team. This created a disconnect between product development and market positioning.

Team Burnout and Fatigue

Overall, the lack of structure and clear processes contributed to a high degree of burnout. The team felt constantly under pressure to meet tight deadlines, many of which were arbitrary and subject to change. Additionally, as the team had to scrap features after development, they felt their hard work went unrecognized, eroding motivation. They didn't feel a sense of achievement at the end of Sprints due to the absence of a shippable product.

The Approach

After understanding these extensive challenges, Arundhati proposed several solutions that the team adopted to transform their Agile process:

- **Team Building Initiatives:** Initially, the developers worked in isolation and only communicated transactionally via Google Hangouts. To foster team spirit, they were encouraged to create a team name and incorporate weekly coffee chats to build relationships.
- **Daily Scrum Meetings:** Arundhati emphasized the value of the Daily Scrum. The team adopted tools to manage remote Daily Scrums, improving communication and coordination.
- **Appointing a Product Owner and Prioritizing Backlog:** The startup brought in a dedicated Product Owner to prioritize the product backlog. They established long-term goals and reducing the need for the CEO to assign work on an ad-hoc basis. The team shifted from reacting to ad-hoc requests to working from a properly prioritized backlog. This ensured that only the most important tasks were tackled in each Sprint.
- **Demo-able Product Increment:** The team established a common [Definition of Done \(DoD\)](#), ensuring that each Sprint ended with a working, demo-able product increment.
- **Introducing Buffer Time:** To prevent burnout, Arundhati helped the team incorporate a 30% buffer time in their Sprints for increased velocity and sustainability.
- **Making Retrospectives Engaging:** The team held creative Sprint Retrospectives to foster continuous improvement. This made the process more engaging and productive.
- **Two-Week Sprints:** They reduced Sprint length from three weeks to two. This allowed for faster iterations, quicker feedback, and better adaptability to changes. They also retained the flexibility to revert to three-week Sprints if necessary.
- **Adopting Story Points for Estimation:** The team learned to estimate in story points rather than hours, which helped set more realistic expectations around task completion and gave a better sense of progress.
- **Full-Time UX Designer:** Recognizing the delays caused by having a part-time designer, the startup hired a full-time designer to streamline the design process and enable faster development.
- **Investing in Training:** Arundhati provided additional Scrum training for the Scrum Master, Development Team, and Product Owner. This deepened their understanding of Agile principles, ensuring long-term success.
- **Tracking Team Happiness:** Last, Arundhati introduced the use of a happiness metric. This enabled the team to track and improve their mood and motivation over time.

Outcomes and Key Results

Six months after implementing these changes, the team experienced noticeable improvements:

- **Team Ownership and Empowerment:** Developers felt more ownership over their work and product.
- **Shippable Increments:** The team developed a steady rhythm of delivering a shippable product increment by the end of each Sprint. Though they sometimes fell short, they used Sprint Retrospectives for continuous improvement.
- **Reduced Bottlenecks:** A full-time designer streamlined the development process, leading to fewer delays.
- **Improved Leadership Focus:** The CEO was able to focus more on fundraising and strategic growth, as the Product Owner handled day-to-day product management. As a result, the company was in talks to secure a seed round of funding.
- **Team Morale:** With regular retrospectives and better communication, team morale improved, and burnout was reduced.
- **Increased Transparency:** The CEO and COO increased transparency by sharing marketing and sales efforts with the entire team, fostering a sense of shared purpose.

Conclusion

This transformation at a remote startup in just six months' time is a testament to the importance of proper Agile implementation, where structured roles, clear communication, and strategic prioritization drive success. By addressing deep-rooted challenges and fostering a culture of continuous improvement, the startup was able to enhance team cohesion, deliver valuable product increments, and improve leadership focus, setting the stage for sustainable growth.