Agile and HRM

Experiences with the adoption of Agile in relation to Human Resource Management
Agile and HRM

“What effect does Agile and Scrum have on our HRM processes|department?”, is a question that we often get in our job as Agile consultants. Recently even more than ever before.

It makes sense that nowadays also the HRM departments gets confronted with Agile, and asks questions what it really means for them. Where Agile and Scrum have become mainstream in IT [1] other disciplines in an organization are still struggling with the Agile adoption. At first, traditional HRM is often one of the disciplines that is not involved in an Agile transition. The contrary should be the case, however. Our experiences has taught us that HRM should play an important role during any transition. HRM is at its’ core one of the disciplines that strongly focuses on establishing and maintaining a corporate culture. Real change, and that is what Agile does, focuses strongly on the cultural dimension too. As such, HRM should be involved as a change agent and governing function for the new Agile culture, mindset and behaviors.

This whitepaper is a summary of our experiences with the adoption of Agile with relation to Human Resource Management. We invite you to use these experiences in your own environment and/or an tell us yours at: r.eringa@prowarness.nl
The evolution of Human Resource Management

Traditional management structures are mainly reflections of the industrial revolution. However, we now live in an age where these principles need adaptation to match with the fast-changing, knowledge and software-intensive world. As such, the HRM discipline needs to be involved to ensure that an Agile transformation also addresses the required changes in the way we organize ourselves. In 1911, Frederick Taylor stated [3] that 'In the past the man has been first, in the future the system must be first' and 'It is also clear that in most cases one type of man is needed to plan ahead and an entirely different type to execute the work'. These, at that time, revolutionary ideas were picked up by many and eventually were a catalyst for an era that we will remember as the industrial revolution that brought us wealth and improved work efficiency. These concepts are quickly becoming out of date, as in an information and knowledge-intensive era, not the system, but people and their needs must come first. The main reason that these concepts are out of date is that the characteristics of the workers have changed over time. Nowadays, these so-called knowledge workers must be able to deal with complex situations, where requirements and technology change continuously. They need to be creative, flexible, and innovative.

A nice example of how a system comes before the people is the traditional organizational decision-making structure. For over more than one hundred years successful organization structures were looking similar.

Cultural differences between traditional and Agile software development

The differences between a traditional culture and the intended Agile culture are often significant. Research has proven that there is a direct relation between addressing organizational culture and the success of an Agile transformation. A study at the university of Oregon [2] concludes that there are nine main cultural differences between traditional and Agile software development organizations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Changes</th>
<th>Traditional Software Development</th>
<th>Agile Software Development</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fundamental cultural assumptions</td>
<td>Software is specifiable, predictable, and can be built based on meticulous planning</td>
<td>High quality software is developed by small teams using continuous improvement and testing based on rapid feedback and change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Control</td>
<td>Process focus</td>
<td>People focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Management style</td>
<td>Command and control</td>
<td>Leadership and collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Knowledge management</td>
<td>Explicit</td>
<td>Tacit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Role assignment</td>
<td>Individual and specialized</td>
<td>Self-organizing with role interchangeability encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Communication</td>
<td>Formal</td>
<td>Informal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Customer role</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Project cycle</td>
<td>Driven by tasks and activities</td>
<td>Driven by required product features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Organizational form and structure</td>
<td>Bureaucratic and highly formalized</td>
<td>Flexible, informal, and participative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: CULTURAL CHANGES NECESSARY WHEN ADOPTING AGILE PRINCIPLES [2]

This study teaches us that changing from a traditional to an Agile organization asks that many areas of the organization need to be involved. HRM can help, should help and sometimes must even initiate:

- Communicate changes to the employees, so people will not feel bypassed or misunderstood.
- Consolidate changes into the organization’s processes and habits.
- Redefine roles and job descriptions.
- Redefine salary and bonus schemes.
- Establish training curricula for current and future employees.
- Deformalize and refocus procedures, e.g., personal review processes, personal improvement planning, etc.
- Improve rewarding systems.

This list seems extensive, but could even be expanded more. Moreover, these are just topics, but of course, the question remains: how to implement this successfully? In the remainder of this whitepaper, we will go into details and share our real-life experiences, so they can work as examples or maybe even as a template for your own situation.
If we want to move towards an Agile culture, we need to change these traditional decision making structures. This does not mean we need to break down the structure; while some people focus on building products and services, others focus on facilitating them. However, in a fast changing, knowledge intensive organization the decision making needs to happen in all levels of this pyramid. With the move from analog, mechanical and electronic technology to digital technology we have entered the third Industrial revolution, the digital revolution. In this high speed, interconnected world requirements and technology changes so fast that the 100 year old management philosophy from the industrial Revolution no longer works [4]. In this era, the most knowledge lies with the workers and no longer with a few managers.

The reason why companies like Google, Facebook and Pixar have made such a big difference compared to their competitors is because they understand that true innovation and inspiration can only come from creative individuals. Plus the world is ever faster changing, and in not foreseeable directions, which renders old management approaches obsolete. Creative individuals and knowledge workers need to be facilitated, self-organized and not managed [5]. HRM can help in taking the first steps in this big change.

From Human Resource Management to Knowledge Work Facilitation

A small, but important step in changing towards a more Agile culture is to reconsider the term ‘Human Resource Management’.

Although HRM has evolved since Taylors book, the term ‘Human Resource Management’ was long considered as something entirely normal.

To accomplish a change in the traditional management philosophy we should no longer use the term ‘Managing Human Resources’. We should be talking about ‘Facilitating Knowledge Workers’.

In the remainder of this paper, HRM will be called knowledge work facilitation and HR employees will be called knowledge work facilitators. This change of name might seem small and unimportant, but small things can make a big difference and cause a tipping point. Just as a single sick person can start an epidemic of the flu, so too can a small but precisely targeted push cause a fashion trend, the popularity of a new product, or a change in the culture of your organization [6].

Facilitating knowledge workers in an Agile organization

Now we have started a first, small change by renaming HRM to knowledge work facilitation, let’s see what areas a knowledge work facilitator should focus on during an Agile transition.

Traditionally, the main focus areas of knowledge work facilitation [7] are:

- **Staffing** - The recruitment and selection of potential employees
- **Developing** - Providing employees a continuous process of competence development
- **Motivating** - Increasing the value employees deliver to the organization and their customers
- **Maintaining** - Keeping employees committed and loyal to the organization

Although these traditional focus areas are still valid, we have discovered that Agile organizations often have different ways of approaching these areas.

Staffing knowledge workers

Steve Job once said that “The only way to do great work is to love what you do”. So when staffing/hiring new employees, you have to be looking for the ones with a passion for the work itself.

In the highly competitive market we live in, hiring good, creative and passionate knowledge workers has become one of the biggest challenges for almost every company out there. In an annual survey [8], LinkedIn concludes that the most valuable metric for recruiters in 2015 will be “Quality of hire”.

So, what can knowledge work facilitators such as recruiters do to hire the best knowledge workers out there?
Our experience learns that a number of best practices have improved the hiring of new talents:

1. **Teams who recruit and select their new colleagues**
   It’s easy to make a recruiter responsible for hunting the best people out there. However, it’s hard to find them and even harder to convince them to join you. The traditional way of hiring people is often top down, where recruiters are hunting the field and managers are doing most of the hiring responsibilities, like doing job interviews and deciding who to hire.

   In an Agile organization, we aim at having self-organized teams with informal communication who are responsible for everything they do. Our experience with these teams is that they are perfectly capable of selecting new team members, as long as they are provided with the right guidelines for selection. Tasks, like creating a job description, reviewing resumes and doing interviews can be done by the team. Knowledge work facilitators can help in providing the guidelines for these activities.

   Another advantage of teams that select their own colleagues, is that they are much more motivated of making the new connection succeed, since it has now become their responsibility.

   An Agile knowledge work facilitator no longer focusses on the execution of the process, but on facilitating the teams to do the execution.

2. **Empirical hiring**
   When staffing new employees, we often hire them based on conversations, resumes and data provided. In other words we are taking a best guesses, often based on gut feeling. Agility and Scrum are based on the idea of empirical process control. Instead of using the traditional best guess solution making, we base our decisions on learning by doing in small iterations by gathering evidence (transparency, inspection and adaption).

   We have seen a number of occasions where potential new employees worked with their team on an assignment before hiring them. In this way the team decided themselves if they valued the new employee.

   We have also seen examples where potential employees were boarded on a team for only one day to build software together. A single day of collaboration is often enough to discover the connection with this new person. In this way the team can make a decision, based on facts, instead of gut feeling.

3. **Pay them to leave**
   Most organizations use probationary periods. After the probation period the new hire is evaluated on his progress, skills and other aspects such as honesty, reliability, and interactions with co-workers, supervisors or customers.

   Some companies take it even a step further by offering their new hires a serious amount of money to quit after the probation period. In this way they discover if the new hires are really serious about their new job or if they have serious doubts.

   If the new hires don’t feel intrinsically passionate enough, on the long term the investment is definitely worth it.

4. **Using the network of your employees**
   Companies often spend a lot of money on the recruitment of new employees by advertising campaigns through traditional channels (newspapers, social media, internet/career websites). Although these channels have proven useful, targeting a more dedicated audience works better [8]. The chance of finding a new employee is much higher when asking people who have a lot of weak ties [6] in their social network than asking your close relations or targeting a large audience.

   For a recruiter, LinkedIn is a good tool, but it becomes much more powerful if the recruiter would use the help of the employees (who often have a lot of weak ties in their social network) to search for new people.

   Most of the highly skilled people we hired in the past came from some network connection of the people working in our teams.

5. **Creating tribal awareness**
   One of the advantages of the interconnected society we live in, is the availability of tribes (a community/social group were people are connected to each other and/or an idea). In his book “Tribes, we need you to lead us” [9], Seth Godin talks about the power of being part of a tribe. Becoming part of a tribe gives you the opportunity to be a leader at what you do and besides this you will attract likeminded people.

   So if an organization wants to invest in hiring new people, it is a good idea to be part of such a tribe.

   In the Agile community there is a large number of seminars/conferences that focus on various topics. Sending an employee to a seminar or conference without any obvious purpose can seem a strange thing to do as a manager, especially when this means the employee is not productive for a few days. However, at these places they often meet the most passionate people who have lots of new ideas. From a recruitment perspective, these places are the Walhalla for finding new people and extending your social network.
We have seen that the organizations who take part in these kind of tribes contain more enthusiastic professionals. As a result they make faster steps in becoming more Agile and responsive due to the professionalization of their knowledge workers.

Developing knowledge workers

Developing knowledge workers is all about turning professionals into experts. Such an expert should be sustainable, operational [10] and has the following characteristics:

- Always has state-of-the-art knowledge to his disposal
- Innovates and evolves his profession
- Feels responsibility for his work and publishes
- Works for a collective, tribal cause
- Shares his knowledge internally and externally to his organization and society
- Feels responsible for growing his own skills
- Does his job with pleasure and loves his customers

Knowledge workers are motivated by being challenged and by getting the opportunity of becoming better at what they do. Knowledge work facilitators should provide knowledge workers with a continuous process of competence development in terms of training and knowledge exchange.

Improving skills

What can knowledge work facilitators do in an Agile organization to stimulate people to improve their skills? It is not talent, but hard work, a stimulating environment and motivation that determine who will excel [11]. And even mere practice is not enough; it is more important that deliberate practice is carefully designed so that weaknesses in performance are overcome and level of performance improves. The most important activities for developing expertise are

a) Consulting a colleague
b) Evaluating an assignment

d) Encouraging and evolving his profession

e) Facilitating and sharing knowledge

This research has proved a number of differences between an expert and a professional:

- Masters perform (a) and (b) more often than professionals
- Masters spend twice as much time on codified knowledge development (reading scientific literature, research, teaching, visiting congresses and conferences) than professionals
- Masters inspect and adapt their processes more often than professionals

Knowledge work facilitators in an Agile organization should create and encourage an environment where people are able to frequently consult & evaluate their peers.

Besides trainings & workshops, some best practices we have seen from facilitators at our customers:

- Frequently organized knowledge sharing events such as mastership classes, seminars, Open Spaces [12] and innovation events/hackathons [13]
- Frequently facilitated team sessions to share practices such as pair programming [14] and coding dojo’s [15]
- Inviting external experts to inspire and share knowledge
- Encourage teams, customers and stakeholders to join the sprint reviews
- Facilitate teams and Scrum Masters to get the best out of retrospectives

Measuring skill acquisition

During an Agile transition we often get the question how to determine that people or teams are improving their skills to become more self-organizing and self-sustaining. In other words, there is a need to determine the level of acquired skills as a result of formal instruction and practice. In 1980, two students [16] at the University of California, Berkeley, presented an influential model of how students acquire skills through formal instruction and practicing.

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<th>Necessity</th>
<th>Coping with complexity</th>
<th>Perception of context</th>
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<td>Novice</td>
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Motivating knowledge workers

Knowledge workers value being rewarded for their contributions. However, we also know that huge financial rewards often stimulate wrong behavior. In the last few years we have seen that in the banking industry wrong incentives have led to risk taking, untrustworthy behavior and huge losses which led to a financial crisis.

In his book “Drive, The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us” [17], Dan Pink shows what motivates people who need conceptual, creative thinking in their work. For creative work, money is a slightly different motivator. Money does not motivate, but paying not enough is a demotivator. Or as Dan Pink states: "We must pay people enough, so they no longer think about money but think about the actual work they do". Dan Pink’s research then shows that once people are paid sufficiently, knowledge workers are motivated by:

- Autonomy – Our desire to be self-directive
- Mastery – Our desire to become better at the things we do
- Purpose – Our desire to make a difference

Simply stated, knowledge workers like to be rewarded for their contributions, but if we reward them in the wrong way they will start showing wrong behavior. Most of the motivational models used today were developed in earlier eras, when work and (our view on) workers were different. The younger generation, raised in the era of technological innovation wants to be in control and deliver a contribution. Ancient rewarding systems no longer work [18], so if we want a change in peoples’ behavior, we should change these ancient rewarding systems. In his 1990-book on measuring performance [19], Eli Goldratt states: "Tell me how you will measure me, and I will tell you how I behave". In other words if you measure people in an irrationally way, you should not complain about the irrationally behavior it is causing.

A knowledge work facilitator in an Agile organization should focus on creating a rewarding system that motivates people intrinsically.

Rewarding knowledge workers: from Extrinsic to Intrinsic motivation

Instead of motivating people from outside in, we want them to be motivated inside out (Jurgen Appelo [20], [21]). Appelo suggests guidelines for a rewarding system that is built on Agile and empirical principles like transparency, small iterations and absence of hierarchical roles:

When rewarding people 6 rules need to be taken into account:
1. Don’t promise rewards in advance (so that people don’t change their intentions and focus on the reward)
2. Keep anticipated rewards small (since big rewards are likely to decrease the performance of people)
3. Reward continuously, not once (so people start doing useful work every day, because every day is an opportunity for a reward)
4. Reward publicly, not privately (so that everyone understands what is rewarded and why)
5. Reward behavior, not outcome (so people will focus on good behavior, instead of making shortcuts)
6. Reward peers, not subordinates (because feedback from the peers you work with is much more valuable for improving yourself)

Most traditional companies have a rewarding system that is directly coupled to the yearly performance reviews. A system like this often leads to frustration, because of the arguments mentioned in these 6 rules.

At Prowareness we have decoupled our bonus system from the performance reviews. As a result people are giving each other feedback on a regular basis (an example of rewarding continuously), which leads to much better personal improvement plans.

Another big difference that we implemented is making the wages and bonuses transparent to everyone in the organization (an example of rewarding publicly). As a result of this, there are no longer awkward conversations at the coffee machine where colleagues are gossiping about the possible salary heights of their peers.
Maintaining knowledge workers

Getting new people into your team or organization is one challenge, but avoiding the good ones to leave is another. Too many times organizations spend a lot of effort in getting good people in, but have too less focus in keeping the good ones from leaving.

Several well respected global researchers [22] have shown that employee turnover rates are rising and will keep doing so for the next few years. This means that organizations will need to take their employee turnover serious and must focus on keeping their workers happy and motivated. The same research states that there are 5 factors that impact employee retention:

1. **Confidence in the organization and leadership**
   An Agile transition can be a threat if you do not clearly communicate the vision and impact of the changes to your employees. One of the best practices in guiding an Agile transition is to invite knowledge work facilitators to the transition team and determine the communication plan towards the employees.

2. **Room for growth**
   Most people want to reach their potential at work. Employees want to know that there are opportunities to learn, grow and progress. Continuously improving teams seek constant knowledge and are in need of sharing experiences. Your organization needs to make sure that each employee can grow towards his expertise and ambitions. Knowledge work facilitators can help Scrum Masters and teams to determine what skills a team needs (for example by using a T-profile [23]) and which are missing. When skills are missing, teams should focus on improving those skills, like stated before in this paper.

3. **A fair exchange**
   A rewarding system (see previous section on motivating knowledge workers) is an important mechanism to stimulate the contributions employees make.

4. **An environment for success**
   In order to have employees perform at their best it means placing the right people in the right roles, creating efficient work processes, enabling collaboration and providing a supportive working environment.

In an Agile environment we should not underestimate the importance of teams being able to sit together in one room or use good (communication) tools (especially when they are co-located). When using Scrum the roles of a Product Owner, Scrum Master, but also member of a development team need to be clear to everyone. In addition, at large organizations we often see complementary roles of Chief Scrum Master and Chief Product Owner. Also stakeholders need to be informed on their responsibilities towards the team in order to stimulate good communications and expectation management.

5. **Authority and influence**
   For engagement in the work place people need an extent of authority and influence in the work they do. Knowledge work facilitators can help management to determine the conditions in which the teams can be self-organizing for the work they do, so they can become creative and innovative within these boundaries.

**Facilitating Agile managers**

One of the important tasks of a knowledge work facilitator is to facilitate the managers in an Agile organization. In fact, in a true Agile organization, the managers are the knowledge work facilitators. Regardless if knowledge work facilitation is a separate role or part of a managers responsibility, knowledge work facilitators need to understand what it takes to be a good Agile manager.

Our experience learns that many traditional organizations who are considering an Agile transition, struggle with traditional management philosophies. According to Mathieu Weggeman [10], a Dutch professor in organizational studies, knowledge workers are already motivated, until they meet this traditional manager. If you push professionals\knowledge workers in a direction they were already heading, they will start leaning in the opposite direction. According to Weggeman, a manager of professionals:

- Needs to foster a collective ambition, so that professionals can work inside their passion zone (our experience learns that helping professionals to find their passion is one of the challenges a manager often faces during an Agile transition)
- Needs to inspire employees and involve them in the company's strategy
- Needs to communicate openly, timely, be there and…listen
- Needs to give feedback and be clear about expected output
- Needs to be assertive towards employees who stopped being a professional
- Needs to act as a heat shield for the corporate noise
- Needs to be authoritative, but at the same time servant, with a modest attitude

A leader is best when people barely know he exists. When his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves. - Lao Tzu
Outline

10 Tips for an Agile knowledge work facilitator
As a summary to this paper, here are our 10 tips towards Agile HR:
1. Before changing anything, make everyone aware of the cultural changes ahead
2. Involve HRM in your Agile transition team
3. Stop calling your professionals ‘human resources’ and start with facilitating them
4. Become an inspiring leader for your professionals
5. Give the teams the mandate to hire the best
6. Once the best are hired, make sure they will stay
7. Challenge your professionals to become experts
8. Stop annual performance feedback and start continuous performance feedback
9. Change rewards, so people are motivated from the inside out
10. Rewarding publicly, not privately

When the knowledge work facilitators are involved in the Agile transition they can make a big difference in making such a change easier to implement. So if you really want to change the DNA of your company culture, ask a knowledge work facilitator to join the transition team and never call your people human resources again!

Practical tools to support Agile knowledge work facilitators
In many, good functioning Scrum teams you often see a change in the motivation and in the contributions of the teams towards the organization. Self-organized Agile teams feel a strong need for giving each other continuous feedback. There are many tools that can be used to facilitate a team to give and receive such feedback. Some of the tools I’ve used with for team feedback:
• The Feedback Game by Peter Gerrickens [24] that is based on the Core Quality model by Daniel Offman
• 360 degree feedback [25]
• Insights [26]
• The Jung Typology Test [27], based on Carl Jung’s and Isabel Briggs Myers’ typologies
• Jürgen Appello’s new book, called #workout [28]

If you have any questions based on this whitepaper or the tools mentioned above, don’t hesitate to contact us at: r.eringa@prowareness.nl
References


