

Agile Project Management Facilitates Efficient and Collaborative Collection Development Work

Stoddard, M. M., Gillis, B., & Cohn, P. (2019). Agile project management in libraries: Creating collaborative, resilient, responsive organizations. *Journal of Library Administration*, 59(5), 492–511. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1616971>

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To examine the advantages and obstacles of using Agile (an approach to project management) principles to guide collection development work in ways that allow libraries to better address user needs while increasing transparency and collaboration in their processes.

Design – Descriptive case study.

Setting – Libraries at a private, R1 university (doctoral university – very high research activity).

Subjects – Five cross-disciplinary teams of three to six people, with each team focusing on a separate strategic aspect of library collections work (Communications and Data Visualization, E-Resource Contract Negotiation, Serials Workflow Analysis, Demand Driven Acquisitions, and Serials Budget Projection & Assessment).

Methods – The authors facilitated group reflection sessions for the teams to surface outcomes of employing Agile practices and also as a means through which they could learn from their experiences with Agile. The teams engaged in reflection throughout the year-long process where they were asked to share their work, respond to the work of the other teams, and contemplate their own learning and development as a member of a team.

Main Results – Using Agile principles to structure and direct collection development work allowed the libraries to meet their stated goals of spending all available funds on relevant materials within the time frame allotted. This style of collaborative work benefitted from recognition of interrelated information needs, willingness to prioritize experimentation over seeking formal training, centering user needs in planning stages, and practicing reflection as a powerful learning tool. Additionally, the authors noted a strengthening of core skills held in high value throughout libraries, such as leadership and project management. Task-oriented skills that included capabilities like data visualization and operational analysis also progressed through learning by working on cross-functional teams. The authors offered guidance for applying these lessons to situations in other libraries that can be generalized to fit other projects.

Conclusion – Based on their experiences with adopting Agile practices, the authors offered scalable approaches for implementing Agile that speak to employee buy-in and the overall impact of projects undertaken in this manner. Training that reflects a library’s authentic level of investment in Agile, whether minimal or extensive, is crucial to realizing positive outcomes. The authors also recognized that resistance to change and discomfort with working under transparent conditions will present challenges for many libraries in aligning workflows with Agile methodology. However, Agile did allow for positive shifts toward more investment in shared work on team and individual levels. While failure in Agile projects is more visible and therefore more intimidating, librarians can find themselves able to learn from and correct mistakes more efficiently.

Commentary

In the years since Agile was first considered as a potential “better mousetrap for libraries” the framework has been used to create organizations that are product-driven and highly adaptable to change (Heath, 1998). In libraries, Agile principles have been applied to organizational roles (Wu et al., 2022), library management system development (Babatope et al., 2019), remote work (Singh & Bossaller, 2022), and in the current study, collection development

This summary used the generic CAT as an assessment tool, finding the study to have strong qualities in leveraging expertise and adding to previous research (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014). The authors, all of whom are employed in director roles in George Washington University Libraries, framed their case study as investigating the advantages and complications of using Agile methods to conduct interrelated collection development work. In a substantial review of previous literature, the authors provided an overview of Agile principles and highlighted notable instances of Agile usage in library projects and operations.

Concise descriptions of the charge for each team, training, and roles within the team delivered a general sense of how the work was carried out. The final year-end reflection was the only one described, with the exact questions used included in the text, but details on how reflection was built into previous points in the process and the methods under which it was carried out are somewhat unclear. No details were given regarding methods used for analyzing the feedback provided in the reflection sessions.

Despite the lack of clarity on the structure and analysis used for the reflection sessions, the authors drew out practical implications for how agile principles can be utilized in library settings through efforts like training, appropriate framing of principles versus tools, and highlighting user stories to

situate team efforts. In particular, the authors' conclusions regarding adequately preparing people to work in this manner will assist library management with setting up teams for success in many types of projects. Additional research on future team and individual work after the completion of larger-scale Agile projects like this may be useful for recognizing long-term benefits for library management.

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