

Developing agility across systems, processes and people



Abstract

This paper explores the approach taken by a leading electric vehicle manufacturer, to reorganise their digital development team and bring the focus back on customer centricity to drive decision making. It highlights the importance of adopting a customer-centric mindset to streamline work and ensure business alignment by innovating and adapting to customer needs.

In this paper, three key steps of the approach - Assessment, Foundation and Tools Adoption and Community Building – are discussed. The challenges encountered and how they were circumvented are also highlighted to provide insights.

The paper concludes with expert recommendations to apply learnings from this experience to other industries and domains.

Problem statement

It takes teams and organisations years to run like a seamless, well-oiled machine. This is exacerbated when the Development Teams run in a silo from the business and from the customer. In addition, a fast-growing company is under pressure to deliver fast and, in that endeavour, waste and efficiency take a backseat to time and pace. The rapid scaling of the team means that development team has two fundamentally different user groups and product groups, internal and external. The problem at hand is that of organising the team to address the following issues.

- Externally, how might we be closer to the users and adapt quickly to serve their needs better and faster?
- Internally, how might we create B2B products that support business operations and first line operations, particularly to remove waste, increase efficiency and increase synergy among production lines?

Context

As an automotive start-up, the primary focus of the client was to deliver high-performance, smart and autonomous vehicles that were functional, safe, compliant and attractive to early adopters of such technology. Scaling its teams and production as its customer base grew, it became apparent that it needed to augment its customer engagement and interaction efforts through an array of digital products and services.

Digitalisation is key to scaling sustainably and responsibly for any start-up or organisation. With this in mind, the client built a 500 strong digital department to work on multiple product lines including internal products for business operations, products for employees, B2B products for first line operation use and B2C products for customers. However, inefficiencies began to fester, leading to apparent misalignment between the business and the Development Team. Within the digital Development Team, different work styles, tools and methods only heightened the barriers to overcome.

why innovation! was invited to help train and coach the team to organise itself, adopt a customer centric mindset and embrace Agile practices.

Our Approach

Every team is unique, with its own dynamics; hence self-organisation is important to enable creativity and effective collaboration. Nevertheless, with large teams comprising smaller sub-groups, some guidelines help to mitigate miscommunication, eliminating un-productive work and other inefficiencies while delivering a common product vision.

The first step, Assessment, is crucial to have a clear understanding of business strategy and goals, individual and team objectives, to identify delivery challenges and their causes in terms of competencies and existing way of working. The assessment included observing various sub-groups and individuals, several discussions with the development team, business stakeholders and the leadership team and creating a custom maturity model to kick start self-evaluation.

The assessment surfaced the following challenges:

1 Uneven maturity level among different product lines

The digital Development Team was divided along product lines. While it is in the best interest of the organisation that knowledge and feedback be shared across the product lines, the sub-groups had different frameworks and practices. Flow of information, synergetic processes and shared learning were impeded. Common consensus among the teams and key stakeholders was the impetus for a formalised standard that helps the sub-groups align their way of working.

2 Insufficient Agile coaches

In order to lay the foundation for Agile practices and build every team member up to a common level of knowledge and understanding, coaching and training are key. However, to guide a 500 strong Development Team comprising over 30 sub-groups, only 3 coaches were available.

3 Balancing business needs and technical requirements

The digital Development Team was fractured from the business and the users. Some team members commented that they just did as they were told. Work was tactical, often not strategically aligned to the business goals and product vision. Technical specialists did not grasp business needs and business analysts failed to acknowledge technical constraints and requirements.

4 Empathy for the customer

Shared accountability and user centric decision making was lacking. Teams were disconnected from their users and were unable to produce relevant value for them.



The assessment also highlighted some key opportunity areas that would buttress the efforts of the team and accelerate value delivery.

Iterative and continuous self-assessment

As the maturity model was being developed with the teams, it became a useful tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the practices and frameworks chosen, how they were adapted and the progress of various teams. Transparency, access, and responsibility of this maturity model by the team makes it a great addition to their toolkit as they evolved, self-organised and continuously improved their way of working and value delivery.

Incentive programme

While key stakeholders were eager to formalise standards and processes, an incentive programme would acknowledge teams' efforts and bolster team spirit. Incentives have been shown to accelerate such change management and transformation efforts and encourage self-motivated teams.

Community building and network effects

An internal Agile force or a group of Agile evangelists would promote Agile practices, methods, mindset through the community, to the whole digital department, and even to the whole company. As practitioners, they could learn from each other, endorse the value of Agile and help other teams be Agile.

From the assessment, the most pressing challenge to address was the fragmented knowledge and ways of working. The second step, Foundations & Tools Adoption, addressed this need through a multi-pronged approach targeting both challenges and opportunities.

Because of the scale, nature and structure of sub-groups, SAFe was adopted as a foundational framework. Teams were structured in trains. The

teams were educated in many concepts from SAFe. The key focus was to use SAFe Train structure to build cross functional, multi domain teams with a common business and technology mission. Scrum Masters (SM) and Release Train Engineers (RTE) would be the servant leaders of the Agile Release Train to ensure smooth flow of value within the train. Given that only three Coaches from why innovation! were available, knowledge transfer and rapid training was important. SMs and RTEs selected from the client organisation were trained, coached and would work closely with the coaches. This was a key milestone to enjoy the benefits of SAFe – when all subgroups or teams have a common vocabulary and an aligned way of working, there is less waste and inefficiency internally and we can focus on delivering business value. This is also the genesis of an internal Agile force.

Having established a base maturity level, responsibility for maintaining the maturity model and assessment was shared with the teams. The development and refinement of the maturity model continued, in more advanced levels. Nonetheless, instead of simply handing over a rigid model or regularly monitoring or auditing the teams, the model was clarified and polished iteratively with them. The process involved identifying problems and challenges that teams faced, proposing solutions, running experiments with these practices and methodologies in pilot teams to determine their effectiveness and lastly, promoting them to more teams when successful. A successful solution was then incorporated into the maturity model while an unsuccessful solution would be discarded. This tool and its iterative development also ingrained an experimentation mindset in teams which can also be applied to their products development.

Other training and tools to enable value delivery included design thinking and prioritisation to foster communication among the development team, business stakeholders and customers. The three parties converged on value delivery being the key enabler of user satisfaction, commercial value for the business and technical capabilities, the underpinning principle being customer-centricity. Keeping users in mind,

business stakeholders ascertain feature values and priorities in line with the business strategy and goals. In pilot teams, technical architecture is also considered to establish a priority system encompassing both business and technical requirements while addressing limitations. These priorities are validated with users. Design Thinking framework and tools are leveraged to empathise with the users and generate innovative ideas to ameliorate products and services as well as create new ones.

An incentive programme was set up to encourage and reward practitioners and role models. Teams were motivated beyond delivering value to the customer and business; they gained new competencies, better collaboration and a little bonus too.

With this step, the teams felt empowered with the knowledge and tools to be user centric, run in an Agile way and continuously adapt both their

offerings and themselves. They are well prepared for their transformation journey and positioned for success.

A lot of effort was put in by the client and why innovation! consultants to create and implement a holistic solution that helped the organisation tackle its problem statement effectively. For prolonged success in value delivery and adaptability, sustained efforts to stay nimble, Agile and self-improve is vital. Hence the third step in our support: Building Communities.

Communities are a support network that practitioners can learn from and lean on. They promote Agile practices, methods and mindset. As more teams within an organisation adopt Agile, communities nurture their collaboration and capabilities. They cultivate competent Scrum Masters, Product Owners etc. to iteratively and incrementally upskill and create value.



Conclusion

Several streams of work enabled the desired transformation outcome. The client was able to adopt and apply innovation best practices like Design thinking, Lean Startup and Agile to manage products, organise collaborative teams to deliver incremental value to its customers and business. The Agile practices allowed the teams and product lines to engage users and adapt quickly to their needs. The mindset of the leadership team has significantly changed during the transformation as they are now able to appreciate the value of being Agile. They are building a culture of experimentation and iterative and incremental development for their teams. The teams have knowledge and resources to adopt and apply Agile as they work in cross functional, user centric teams and prioritise efforts keeping in mind the user, the business and the technical architecture. With the support of the internal Agile Community, the client has carried on the endeavor autonomously.

Recommendations

It is always difficult to know where to begin, especially in large scale reorganisation with many parties involved. The most important part of transformation is People. They are the heart of an organisation and hence core to the transformation journey. They need to be involved, supported and empowered. Below are some recommendations to kick-start a similar initiative in an alternative context.

1 Knowledge, resources and tools

It is imperative to level the playing field and empower all team members with knowledge, resources and tools. Transparency of this repository allows every motivated team member to excel and feel valued. They are both able and feel encouraged to contribute to the success of the team and their mission. Teams become more competent and capable.

2 Self-assessment and Improvement

Continuous inspection of practices, competencies and processes allows flaws to be uncovered and addressed quickly. Teams can work out the kinks together and as they improve themselves and their way of working, they are able to deliver value more efficiently. Such a behaviour of self-assessment and improvement needs to be cultivated so that the teams figure out how they work best. It also eliminates the pressure of external audits, the distraction of third parties and the risk of a blame culture.

3 Incentives

Incentives are a powerful way of accelerating the adoption of certain behaviours. Teams are not only motivated but feel appreciated and valued. This encourages their commitment to the mission.

4 Context

Collaborate with stakeholders early and frequently to be mindful of the client's context, their organisation culture, current ways of working before making any recommendations. The value why innovation! brings to the client is not just the theoretical knowledge of ideal frameworks, but the pragmatic, tailored implementation that fits the context of the client, its industry and maturity while addressing the problem to solve.

5 User centricity

Align all stakeholders, leadership and teams on the vision, goals and the user needs. Business value metrics should quantify the users' needs and business benefits. It is a waste to build a product that no one needs, wants or finds useful.

Interested in knowing more about Agile transformation and training?
Email us: contact@why-innovation.com