



Preparing Scrum teams to work remotely

Time will tell the true impact that COVID-19 will have on the future of business operations and people. Traditional ways of working are changing as more organizations have employees work from home be it temporarily or permanently. To best navigate the changing environment, it is important to think about how to operate Scrum teams and agile-at-scale.

Distributed VS virtual agile teams

A virtual team is now necessary. As employees practice social distancing, teams are no longer able to collocate making maintaining team spirit more challenging. With this change comes the need to develop new mechanisms that can potentially benefit clients in the future.

Adapting to agile ways of operating as well as adopting some of the practices we use to make agile effective will help. These practices include:



More rigor around communications



Better and more casual use of technology; video-capable tools become the norm



Better use of collaboration tools and ensuring they are widely available and infrastructure supports them



More accountability for the Scrum Master to become as much a team cheerleader as a servant leader



Very efficient methods of removing impediments with short-cycle and lightweight processes



Driving accountability to lower levels within teams to increase efficiency in decision-making

Customers will need to think differently as well. As you adapt your approach to business in the evolving business environment, you should encourage customers to stay open to making changes to the way things are done. Arrangements become partnerships where the customer gets the best your organization can deliver and collaborates with you. Deliveries become outcome-based and virtual teams are still accountable for those outcomes.

Working during uncertain times

Use existing mechanisms: One of the success factors for remote work is having communication rhythm at all levels. The Scrum framework provides teams with mechanisms to share their work every day, every sprint, every release and to collect feedback and continuously improve ourselves. To be ready for remote work, you need to check which tools support the existing mechanisms.

Explore communication tools with the team: Many communication tools can support remote work. Start with what is already on hand. Get the team together, list out all the communications you need and then check your toolbox as to which tool can fulfill the needs. When you choose communication tools for Scrum events or existing mechanisms, focus on purpose over the format of events. It will help you see different solutions. Additionally, consider a plan B. Ask the team, if one tool is not working, what else can you use? Encourage people to be creative. Overall, let the team choose. There are no best tool for Scrum, only suitable tools for a team.



Form a team agreement for remote work: While you guide the team to explore tools, it is also a good opportunity to get everyone together to clarify your expectations on how you work with each other remotely. What is your overlap time? How do you want to be reached out to? What is your expected response time? Is there a time in which team members do not want to be disturbed or is there free discussion time? Let the team brainstorm on some of those ideas and form a remote working team agreement. Pull out the team agreement from time to time to refresh it. [Reference: [An Exercise for Creating a Team Working Agreement](#)]

Keep calm and be confident: Working remotely is a feasible plan. Distributed teams are quite common at global high-tech companies and remote work has been practiced and proved many times. When people are not in the same room, they can still build and release great products. Thousands of people all over the world built the famous operating system, Linux, – all remotely. It is a good start to give Scrum teams the confidence that this is doable.

Show empathy to each other: Health is important. Staying healthy is the purpose we are at home and separate from each other physically. As a team, people can give each other permission to take care of themselves and their families. Some of them may be operating in less than ideal workspaces. Be accommodating regarding background noise (family, pets, etc). If you are playing a leadership role, make people feel comfortable to reach out, make them feel heard, supported, especially while working remotely. As leaders, show vulnerability to team members as well.

Social distancing and stay social as a team: We apply social distancing with ourselves, but human are social beings. As a team, there are a lot of social activities we can do even when we are not physically together. Turn on a webcam and invite the team for a virtual coffee over a video conference call; use a few minutes before a meeting to share small anecdotes or jokes; tell teammates what you are reading, listening or watching recently, even share some healthy receipts or snack ideas. There are many ways to stay connected as a remote team. [Reference: [Agile Games for Distributed Teams](#)]

Be adaptive: Those tips are not silver bullets for remote work. Feel free to offer them to Scrum teams, let the team make their choices, experiment with them and use a feedback loop to see how it goes. Scrum teams may come back with even better ideas. That is the beauty of continuous improvement and the beauty of agile.

Organizational agility will be key to respond to the rapidly evolving and ambiguous COVID-19 situation. Once implemented, we hope the tips above will help your organization adapt to agile ways of operating and put practices in place to help prepare your Scrum team for remote work.



About the author

Jason Shi is an agile consultant and agile team builder with a passion for creating trusting and encouraging environments that help people unleash their potential. He has transitioned people from working groups to high-performance, cross-functional teams in a manner of weeks. In addition, he has built teams in a variety of work situations—from a single Scrum team to distributed Scrum teams with members from third-party vendors located in multiple countries. He has also worked with many Scrum teams within the areas of leadership, technology and people management. He loves being the driving force for agile transitions at small and large organizations with complex technical and business requirements.