AWG - A Sustainable Engine for Enterprise Agile Adoption

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As organizations realize that the traditional way of doing business is not aligned with today's market demands, Agile has continued to become a preferred way of breaking the back of the "old way of doing business" and help organizations increase speed and adaptability while maintaining quality. Compelling results have been visible across a number of industries, but the picture becomes more nuanced when considering enterprise adoption of Agile. Because Agile requires change across every facet of the business, the sheer scope and complexity of a comprehensive organizational change can quickly kill forward progress if it's not handled as a strategic change management effort.

One approach to enterprise Agile adoption that is gaining traction is to establish an Enterprise Agile Working Group (AWG), a group of people dedicated solely to the implementation of Agile at the enterprise level. An AWG can greatly reduce risk, increase the speed and establish a sustainable engine for growth of the enterprise transition of Agile in the enterprise.

In the following, we'll outline why an AWG helps enterprise organizations be successful in implementing Agile, describe the characteristics of a successful AWG, outline critical success factors and explain some of the benefits you can expect to see as a result of leveraging an AWG as part of your Agile enterprise adoption strategy.

What is an AWG?

An AWG is a Scrum team whose product is the enterprise implementation of Agile. Although it does not necessarily produce software (it certainly could if it helps add value to the product), it works on a prioritized list of backlog items that is demonstrated to a set of

stakeholders in a predictable, set cadence. Let's have a look at why establishing such a group can be so powerful when implementing Agile at the enterprise level.

One of the key reasons establishing an AWG is so effective is that it creates very visible, concrete evidence of management support. One of the most frequently cited reasons for failure to adopt Agile in the enterprise is that the necessary support at the executive levels is merely superficial and without real teeth. Sure, there will be an initial surge of excitement as the organization works on implementing a new process, but as the implications of the necessary changes permeate across the organization, the gravitational pull of the "status quo" will quickly destroy progress unless there is a visceral reminder that "We're All In". The AWG serves that purpose.

Beyond its mere presence, the AWG also creates an Agile center of excellence within the organization. Although there is likely to be pockets of Agile enthusiasts across the organization, the AWG helps concentrate and focus the latest and best thinking in an easily accessible, highly tangible manner. Employing external consultants and firms make sense for areas of expertise where the organization is generally lacking, but the core set of Agile expertise is centered in the AWG so that the organization is not held hostage to opportunistic consultants or tied into external resources who do not truly understand their business.

As such, the AWG becomes a sustainable competitive advantage as it combines sophisticated Agile thinking with a deep understanding of the core business; a very powerful combination.

Characteristics of an AWG

First, let's be up front and clarify that creating an AWG requires a real commitment - a

commitment of the type of dedicated, highly qualified resources that an organization would normally place on high profile and risk-intensive projects. Implementing Agile at the enterprise level falls under both these categories so the people you place in this group need to be your A-players in order for the implementation to be successful.

Second, while these resources enjoy great respect and credibility within the organization, they also need to be thought leaders in the broader, external Agile community so that your organization can benefit from the best Agile thinking. They need to be curious, constantly strive to improve themselves and reach out to fellow Agile enthusiasts in other organizations so that they can learn from each other's experiences.

In essence, members of the AWG are evangelists. They are true champions of their product (i.e. enterprise adoption of Agile) and will demonstrate incredible energy and enthusiasm even when faced with a constant stream of negativity and "this will never fly" attitude. They do this because they genuinely believe there is a better way to work and they believe Agile will help make their workplace a better place to spend a significant portion of their lives. It's personal for them.

The AWG consists of people with highly complementary skill sets. Just like any successful Agile team, the members of the AWG will exhibit a wide range of experiences, professional expertise and innate abilities. You may have technical experts who understand TDD and Continuous Deployment at a deep level working together with behavioral psychologists who have a keen understanding of the people and leadership implications of making organizational changes. They have a wide range of skills - across functional, technical and cultural areas - and a unified sense of purpose.

Lastly, just as is evident in any high performing team, the AWG has a strong Product Owner - someone with a clear vision and understanding of what it means to be Agile at the

enterprise level. This Product Owner combines strong domain knowledge with a deep understanding of Agile principles - and is able to articulate, inspire and provide a vision to the rest of the team of what Agile at the enterprise level "looks like".

Critical Success Factors:

Establishing an AWG greatly increases the probability of successfully implementing Agile at the enterprise level. To optimize the environment in which the AWG operates, keep the following success factors in mind:

Keep Executive support highly visible

- As noted earlier, simply having an AWG demonstrates executive support, but there is no substitution of having an executive sponsor with skin in the game. Consider appointing an influential VP (or higher) as executive sponsor with direct accountability for the AWG's success or failure. When things get rough - and they will since this will involve significant changes - having an influential sponsor to help remove impediments and protect the group is essential.

Full Time Commitment

- The AWG consists of full-time, dedicated resources. It is understandable that the organization hesitates to allocate their best and brightest to an initiative that does not by itself create a product. But when considering the end-to-end impact of what this group will help your organization achieve, it's a simple decision. This is not a committee of PowerPoint creators and status report writers - when executed properly these individuals will fundamentally change your organization for the better. You'll want your best people in this group.

Demonstrate Progress Constantly; Benchmark Agility

- To maintain support and continuously demonstrate its value to the organization, the AWG

will demonstrate tangible, highly visible results in a predictable cadence. This means that at the end of every sprint, each story accepted by the Product Owner will have a clear outcome and the business value to the organization will be obvious. In addition, the AWG will regularly measure the organization's level of agility and benchmark those results with other comparable organizations as well as themselves. This supports continuous improvement efforts and aligns strategic direction based on meaningful data in addition to anecdotal evidence.

Size the AWG appropriately

- This is not a scientific number, but based on my experience an appropriate ratio of AWG member to the rest of the organization is 1:300. This means that in an organization of 1500 people, you'll need 5 full-time resources to appropriately staff an AWG. Just as in any Scrum team, this scales to 7-9 people, so if your organization or division is more than 2700 people, it makes sense to split up the AWG into separate teams and ensure the AWGs are aligned at a strategic level so they can independently execute.

What can you expect when implementing an AWG?

The most immediate benefit is speed. Having an empowered group of highly qualified, respected people within your organization responsible for implementing Agile will greatly speed up the adoption process. Although Agile by definition is not a destination and hence never complete, an organization of 1500 people should realistically be able to convert from Waterfall to a consistent, predictable Agile process in 18-24 months. (Note: This does not mean the journey is over at this point, but it does mean you should see real, tangible benefits such as reduced cycle times, increased quality and more adaptability).

Another important benefit is consistency across the enterprise. One of the reasons Agile is very powerful is that it is a framework and a mindset without a set of prescriptive rules and regulations. Unfortunately, this can also be a recipe for chaos in a large organization.

Without a structure in which to implement Agile, creating the type of end-to-end predictability becomes futile. How can you align teams if they all utilize different variations of Scrum? When do know that a story is done if there is not a common understanding of what being "done" means? If engineering practices vary widely among teams, how do we ensure we create flow and avoid bottlenecks in the value stream? Having a defined, common Agile language for your organization helps alleviate these problems; the AWG creates this language.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for having an AWG is accountability. When relying on Agile to "implement itself" organically throughout the organization, there is nobody accountable for a successful implementation and hence failure can quickly happen as the organization inevitably resists change. The AWG understands very well what it is accountable for and have a clearly defined backlog to show how it plans to meet its commitment. In return, the organization helps provide resources and executive support when needed.

Implementing Agile at the enterprise level is not something an organization should undertake unless there is a compelling reason to do so. When organizations realize that the status quo is simply not an option and enterprise change is needed to meet the demands of an altered business landscape, an AWG can greatly increase the speed and probability of success and serve as a positive driver towards enterprise adoption.