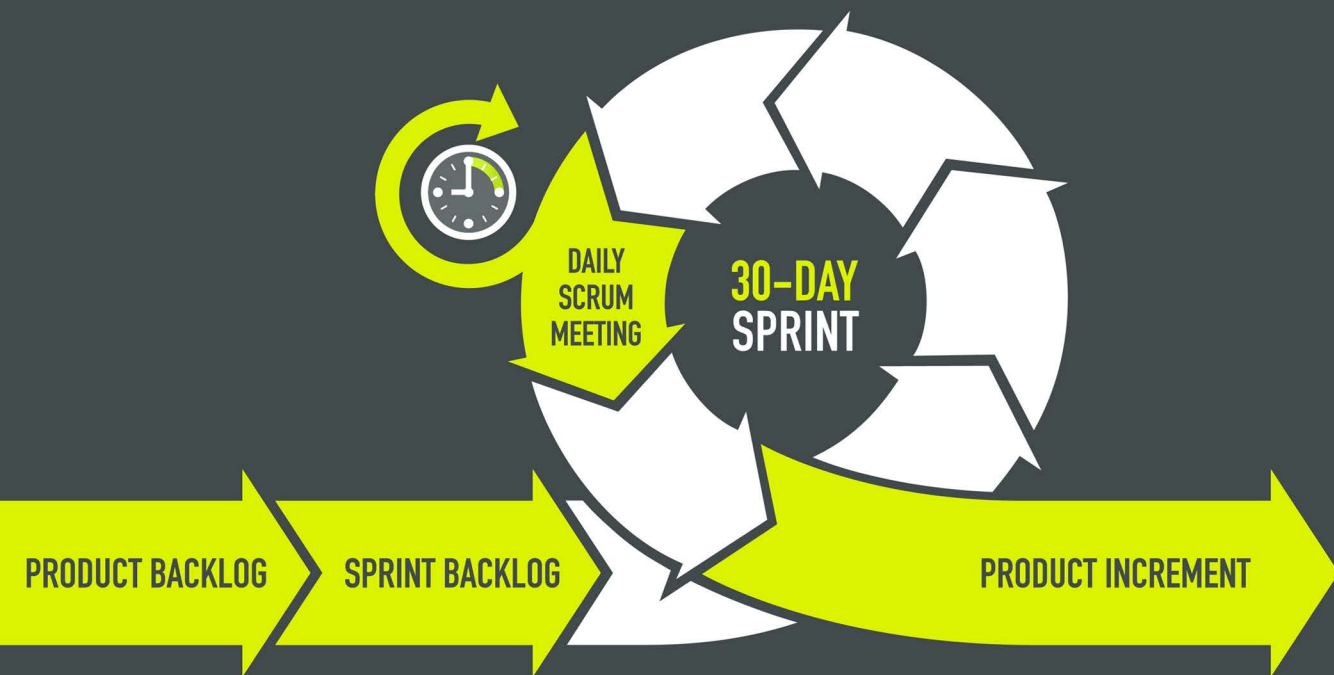




DistantJob
REMOTE PLACEMENT AGENCY

AGILE IN REMOTE TEAMS



Remote teams excel while using Agile methodologies: find out why and how, with detailed examples from companies that have defined the field.

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Introduction

“If I had to work with a dislocated team, I would consider using only an agile approach because an agile approach allows me to see working functionality much sooner and limits the risk of misunderstandings(…)”

Mark C. Layton, chair for the Agile Leadership Network

People say that the future of work is remote; that the work market of tomorrow will be global. We beg to differ.

We say it's the present. It's already here.

“But what about my Agile process? How can my employees do the stand-up meeting if they are not, you know, standing up?”

Relax. You can still stand up. Standing up is healthier than sitting down.. But you don't need to do it in the office.

Yes, much of Agile software development lore exalts the virtue of in-person collaboration. From literal stand-up meetings to at-the-same-desk pair programming. Some Agile authorities go as far as saying that Agile won't work with remote teams and employees. We disagree.

And we are not alone. We will demonstrate that not only does Agile work with a remote setup, but both play to each other's strengths.

We'll be Agile about it. Feel free to stand up.

Case Study

At the Agile 2008 conference, Jeff Sutherland, co-creator of Scrum, and Guido Schoonheim, CTO of Xebia, presented an actual case of reaching successful hyperproductivity with a distributed (remote) team using XP (eXtreme Programming) and Scrum, two of the most widely-adopted Agile frameworks. Both of these projects were large-scale (over one million lines of code), and utilized the Scrum framework and XP practices (pairing, refactoring, and continuous integration).

Here is a matrix that compares the productivity of waterfall, co-located (employees in the office) Scrum, and distributed (remote) Scrum teams, all based on function points (FP) per developer per month:

	Colocated Scrum*	Waterfall*	SirsiDynix Distributed Scrum**	Xebia Distributed Scrum
Person Months	54	540	827	125
Lines of Java	51000	58000	671688	100000
Function Points	959	900	12673	1887
FP per dev. per month	17.8	1.7	15.3	15.1

We can easily see that while remote teams using the Agile framework didn't quite hit the level of efficiency of their co-located counterparts, they got very close - and keep in mind that in the intervening years, communication and project-management software improved a hundredfold, easily helping us close the gap in today's hyper-connected age.

A Quick Primer on Agile

"Most of what we call management consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done."

Peter Drucker, Legendary Management Consultant



"What is "Agile" ? What does it do and why should I care?"

We'll get you up to speed on one of the most effective management approaches in the IT field, and provide a short glossary of terms.

If you've already implemented an Agile approach and want to adapt the principles to a remote or distributed team, feel free to skip this section and we'll fill you in.

Agile is more than a management style: it's a philosophy.

"The Agile movement seeks alternatives to traditional project management. Agile approaches help teams respond to unpredictability through incremental, iterative work cadences, known as sprints. Agile methodologies are an alternative to waterfall, or traditional sequential development." -- The Agile Movement

Agile is about cutting through the fat, the bureaucracy, the endless layers of management, and giving your employees the breathing space to do the only thing that really matters: their best work.

Agile methodologies employ the following techniques::

- Minimize hierarchy and set up a horizontal team dynamic.
- Define the minimum viable features of the software you aim to build, based on use-case scenarios.
- Organize lightning-fast daily meetings where everyone on the team has a voice
- Plan the development of the features in short bursts of work.
- Review with the team after each burst, to decide on what should be added, removed or iterated on.
- Tie this all together into delivering a working version as early on as possible.

Common processes put all the planning upfront. Then the developers bunker down for two years and emerge from their underground silo with a product that people stopped caring about 1.5 years ago.

With the Agile process, planning and developing happen side-by-side, with the aim to launch a *Minimal Viable Product* as early as possible - and if functionality suddenly becomes irrelevant, the team will be able to immediately course-correct, or cut their losses early on.

There are other important components of Agile, such as its focus on the client throughout development, but these basics will help you understand how Agile and remote teams are a great fit for each other.

Agile / Remote Glossary

Distributed Development

A term used to describe a project when at least one part of the development team is remote.

Scrum

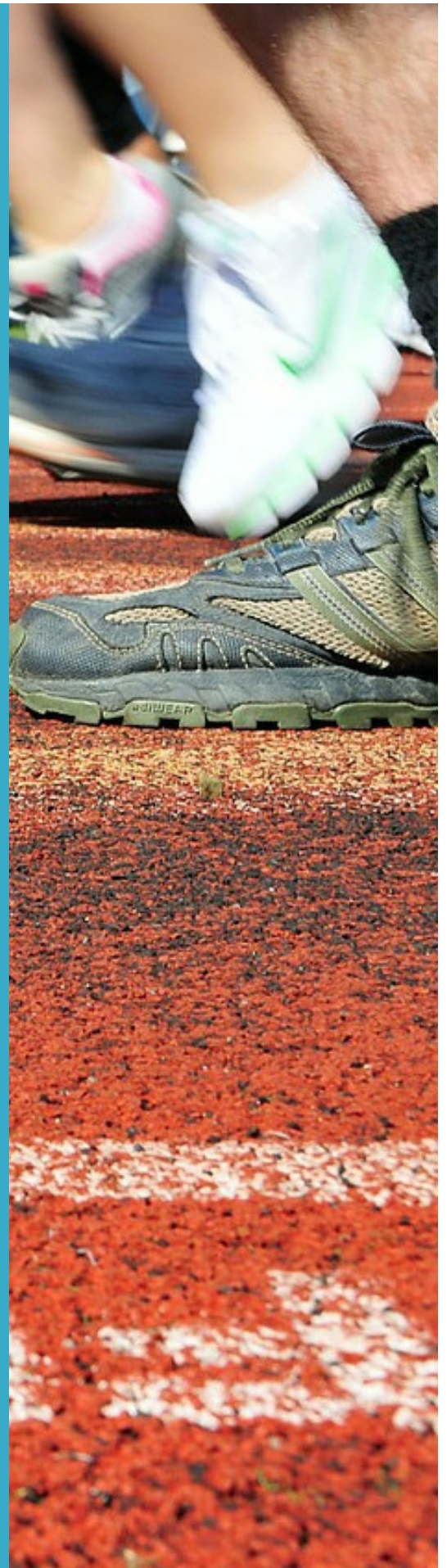
Scrum is a simple framework for effective team collaboration on complex projects. It divides the people on the project in three roles - *Product Owner*, *Scrum Master*, and *Development Team* - and revolves around four key meetings, called "events": *Sprint planning*, *Daily scrum*, *Sprint review* and *Sprint retrospective*.

Product owner

This is the person that represents and speaks for the business needs of the project. He or she should define the initial vision for the team.

Scrum master

This is the team member responsible for protecting the team from organizational distractions, clearing roadblocks, and keeping the process consistent. He may be aided in this by an experienced Agile coach.



Development team

Performing the day-to-day work, the team should be cross-functional: although team members may have strengths, each member is capable of doing multiple jobs on the project.

Sprint planning

These take place just before each sprint starts. In sprint planning meetings, scrum teams decide what goals, scope, and tasks will be part of the fixed sprint backlog.

Daily scrum

Also known as a “stand up meeting”, this takes place daily for no more than 15 minutes. During the scrum meeting, each team member shares what he completed yesterday, what he will work on today, and a list of items impeding him.

Sprint review

This takes place at the end of each sprint, and is where the development team demonstrates to the stakeholders the parts of the product they completed during the sprint.

Sprint retrospective

Following the review, the team holds this internal meeting where every member discusses what went well during the sprint, what didn't work well, and how they can make improvements for the next sprint.

Scrum of Scrums

If two teams are collaborating on a single project - let's say, an in-house team, and a remote team - each may have their own scrum master, and they meet daily on a scrum of scrums.

Sprint

A repeatable work cycle, also known as iteration. In by-the-book Scrum, a sprint is 30 days long, but many teams prefer shorter sprints. During the sprint, a team commits to delivering a specific set of features and nothing else.

Stakeholder

A stakeholder is someone - outside of the scrum roles - that is affected or impacted by the project. It may be a client, but it might also be, for example, your company's liaison with the client, or members of another team.

I - Agile Thrives on Self-Management

"There is no more destructive force more damaging to your Agile than (...) implementation managers, scrum masters, and agile coach's that act like managers. Agile philosophy is that of a servant leader and the self-organized team."

Marshall Guillory, Agile Coach

Ask a seasoned Agile coach or scrum master what makes Agile projects implode, and he will tell you the following: nine times out of ten, it's due to over-management.

The Agile philosophy hinges on trusting the team - and trusting each individual member of the team - to self-manage. The scrum master's role should be one of coaching, using questions to help people get on track and reach their own conclusions and solutions, helping them get an outside-the-box perspective, or, at most, removing roadblocks.



But that's not how it goes, is it? You know how it goes: you get a fancy title like "scrum master" and now it's your responsibility to micromanage your way to supernova, leading the team to untold heights and getting showered with praise in the process! (Okay, maybe not so much.) But we do tend to become control freaks more often than not when we care about our company, our product, and our clients.

Having remote workers changes that. Regardless of whether you are acting as scrum master, are a stakeholder, or just "The Boss", the remote workers force you to have the Agile-required hands-off approach. You simply cannot be micromanaging because remote employees are not in the cubicle around the corner.

You will be forced to trust people. And the magical and wonderful thing about trust - as anyone that has successfully managed projects that were Agile and / or remote will know - is that, when people see trust placed in them, they will go above and beyond to prove themselves worthy.

When you don't have the option to check on someone every 5 minutes, trust comes easier.

II - Remote Means Work Done Around The Clock

"Embrace [distributed development] as a new efficiency, not a cost. Going into the office and finding that work was completed while you slept is magical. It's the closest thing to elves that you'll ever get."

David Jantzen, Senior Software Engineer and Manager



The Agile movement is centered around adaptability and responsiveness to change. In an ideal Agile environment, no-one would have to wait for someone else's work to be done - but we all know conditions are not always ideal

Remote teams make this more attainable, more ideal. While there should be a generous overlap in working schedules, it's easier for someone offsite to pick up the night-shift or work off-hours, because, quite frankly, there's a good chance it's not outside of regular business hours for them.

III - Remote Teams Don't Wait Around

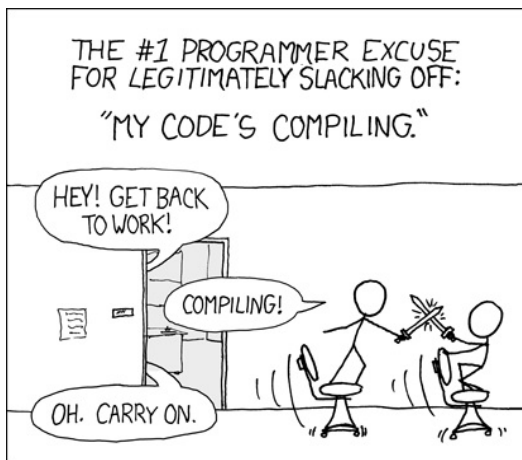
"As a manager, I can't easily know how many hours each person on my team is working. This is actually good for me because it forces me to look at what they've done."

David Fullerton, VP of Engineering at StackExchange

As long as we're coming fresh from the notion of adaptability: You know those nightmares where you are falling and falling and can't see the bottom but you know it's coming?

The team's manager version is this: having most of the team shuffling around with their hands in their pockets because they were relying on someone who just caught the flu, won the lottery and opted for early retirement, was recruited to drive a neighbor to the airport, or whose latest epiphany led to a new religion that scoffed at deadlines.

Too much redundancy causes bloat, and bloat is Agile's Public Enemy #1.



Funnyness provided by courtesy of www.xkcd.com

If John is a continent away from Sam, then it's much harder for them to become co-dependent. If Sam's not around - which she won't be most of the time - John will have to work independently from her, and any other remote employee.

Alas, the beauty of remote employees in an Agile environment.

Yes, there might be some roadblocks where someone absolutely requires to work directly with someone else for a couple of hours, and that's where the scrum master comes in to help them get in sync. With proper communication tools and strategies, this should rarely be the case.

Having remote workers is a great litmus test to discover the failure points in your team's processes. Too many co-dependent processes, and you're no longer overseeing Agile development.

IV - To Be Agile, You Need the Best People

"What's the value of a group of people who can only be picked from among those within a 30-mile radius of a specific office (...) but who's Agile with that capital A? Versus a team composed of the best talent you could find, regardless of where they live, but can't (...) pair in front of the same physical computer?"

David Hansson, Creator of Ruby on Rails



Adopting the principles of the Agile Movement won't turn a mule into a race horse. Agile exists to free awesome people from bloated management practices so that they can do awesome work.

Agile is not a panacea. Apply Agile to average people and you will get average work.

Let's talk math here. What are the odds that the BEST people for your company / team are all located within an acceptable commute distance of your office? What are the chances that highly talented people are willing to relocate? I'm no probability expert but I'd say the number is pretty low!

Sure, average or mediocre people will pack up and move about the country or even the world at the inkling of cold hard cash - but again, we don't want average. We want great. And highly talented people can probably get a pretty sweet deal closer to their home base.

There is simply no way a local recruiting pool can compete - in terms of quality - with the whole world.

An Agile approach thrives on a team whose members: are highly skilled in their fields; have interdisciplinary knowledge; are capable of self-motivating; are a good cultural fit; and can self-manage.

It's a tall order for your local recruitment center. But, for global remote staffing agencies, it's all in a day's work.

V - Agility Requires Mental and Physical Health

"Overworked people are not effective. Too much work leads to mistakes, which leads to more work, which leads to more mistakes. Tired developers = unnecessary bugs = more bug fixing = delayed release = longer time to value."

Mark C. Layton, chair for the Agile Leadership Network

The Agile movement places the emphasis on the team's motivation to do great work, and on each individual's personal well-being as a requirement for that great work to be done.

The best companies know this, which is why they spend millions ensuring that their employees have readily available access to cafes and healthy meal options, top health care and luxury gym memberships. And yet this is often not enough.

Remote workers, free from stressful commutes and working in their personalized work environment, have been proven to be in better physical and mental shape than most employees. This translates into higher efficiency, increased motivation, and top self-management.

With the effort you've made to find and recruit top talent, the last thing you need is for them to lose their edge. You want them razor sharp all of the time. Remote employees increase the likelihood of amplified productivity.

Case Study #2

A survey conducted by ConnectSolutions, a private-cloud solutions provider for Adobe and Microsoft, suggests clear productivity gains for companies that employ remote workers.

As put by the CEO Michael Fitzpatrick:

“Our Remote Collaborative Worker Survey suggests there are significant benefits to be gained by both remote workers and their employers with off-site employees motivated to work harder and more efficiently to protect both the personal and professional benefits of working remotely. Even the personal benefits workers experience can be viewed as employer benefits since workers tend to be happier, less stressed out, and healthier, thereby bringing down the costs of turnover, absenteeism, lower productivity, and other issues.”

Of the 39% who work remotely, 77% exhibit greater productivity compared to on-site workers, with 30% accomplishing more in less time. 23% are even willing to work longer hours, while 52% are less likely to take time off when working remotely—even when sick.

Agile as a Framework for Remote Teams

"As a manager, I can't easily know how many hours each person on my team is working. This is actually good for me because it forces me to look at what they've done."

David Fullerton, VP of Engineering at Stack Exchange

An Agile approach is not a silver bullet. There are framework and personnel requirements that you need to have in place in your company and / or team for an Agile approach to bear fruit.

Hiring remote workers can make some of these aspects easier to achieve and even force you to follow the best practices for Agile.

If different time-zones instill a fear that someone will be unreachable at a crucial juncture, remember that you are the boss and it is always in your power to define the remote employees' schedule. In fact, it is our policy that our candidates need to adhere to your working hours - unless you prefer not to.

Remote hiring gives you the access to the best people in the world to work on your Agile team. It's an extra assurance that they will be able to perform as Agile requires. And it will force you to follow Agile best practices - lean management, reduced interdependence.

That's how Agile remote employment can be.

You can sit down, now.



Let Us Know How We Can Help!

Curious about how to better
implement Agile practices with your
distributed teams?

Get in touch at
contact@distantjob.com to find out
how to put remote employees to
work in your Agile environment.

<http://distantjob.com/>