

10 Tips for Managing Remote Agile Teams

By Mike McEwen, PMP, Dynanet Director of Software Solutions

To lower labor costs and tap larger talent pools, software development is becoming more virtual and distributed. And now that Agile software development is widely accepted, remote Agile teams are a reality. However, one of the 12 principles from the Agile manifesto states, "The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation." A collocated team makes it easier to communicate and build trust—two essentials of Agile—so, if you have remote Agile teams, try to minimize the geographical diversity within each team. My tips for scaled Agile (<http://www.dynanetcorp.com/blog/10-tips-scaling-agile/>) offer other ideas that may help manage remote teams such as cross-functionality, continuous integration, and automated testing. Here are some additional tips for making remote teams successful:

1. **Accept that there will be challenges.** Accept that remote teams are harder to manage and quality issues may be harder to troubleshoot. Capture it as a risk and review regularly. Agile puts the spotlight on obstacles, so expect related issues to surface. To minimize problems, try to hire people who have experience working in a remote environment.
2. **Communicate effectively.** The team needs to hear about impediments during daily standup meetings. It's also important to get input from everyone during story estimation and retrospectives. Therefore, reach out to people who don't speak up, capture retrospective action items and follow-up on them, and confirm that dial-in meeting attendees can hear other attendees. Likewise, those dialing in should minimize background noise and mute themselves when not talking. Scrum Masters and Agile Coaches should spend at least half their time communicating and all team members should mention important issues they might hear about through informal channels.
3. **Build trust.** Charles Handy, an organizational behavior and management expert, noted the importance of trust to successful virtual teams in a 1995 *Harvard Business Review* article titled "Trust and the Virtual Organization." In successful distributed Agile, managers trust remote team members to meet their commitments just like those they see in person. Likewise, remote team members trust managers to give them the same attention, respect, and support as non-remote team members. Trust is hard to earn but easy to lose. Trustworthiness must be demonstrated and requires accountability.
4. **Involve remote workers.** Don't forget to invite remote workers to informal, impromptu (hallway) meetings to handle unforeseen issues or continue carryover discussions from earlier meetings. You can postpone the conversation until everyone gets online or follow up with remote workers afterwards. And be sure to involve representatives from all teams when making important (product-wide) design decisions or sharing feedback from stakeholders.
5. **Use technology wisely.** Don't over-message or distract remote workers. Instead, ask if they have a minute for a question. Use web cams and screen-sharing software, especially during retrospectives and other meetings. Require developers to demonstrate their completed stories regardless of location. Make the Scrum or Kanban board, burndown charts, velocity, and other statistics available electronically.
6. **Up your management game.** Scrum Masters, Agile Coaches, Product Owners, and managers need to establish and communicate a shared vision with related goals. Meetings with remote participants will also require more facilitation and structure. Ensure that every action item has an owner. Designate local leads to keep people connected and watch for burnout, which can happen to remote workers without the rest of the team knowing. Establish question-answer turnaround times and availability ground rules (e.g., enter any prolonged "away" times into a team calendar). Proactively address conflict resolutions and other issues. Don't jump to conclusions.

7. **Be sensitive to time zone, language, and cultural differences.** Make sure the values and cultures represented on the team are complementary. Regularly scheduled meetings help establish routines. Pick a daily standup time that everyone can attend. Try alternating meeting times and allowing remote workers to email their contributions. Avoid or explain idioms and slang. Recognize that it may be hard for some people to adopt transparency and admit their own mistakes or identify those of others. Use documentation to overcome language differences.
8. **Have face-time/meet-ups** (e.g., happy hours, team lunches, recognition meetings, bowling or other recreational outings, etc.) especially for release, product, and contract kickoffs. A few good events per year are well worth the investment.
9. **Celebrate accomplishments and reward good collaboration.** Thoughtfully identify ways of rewarding remote workers after notable successes such as production deployments or kudos from important stakeholders.
10. Finally, **don't be afraid to change** techniques or experiment if something isn't working or a new idea arises.

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