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Applying Agile Methodologies to Acquisition Support

Agile increases productivity, efficiency, accountability, and traceability. It is useful for any stage in the acquisition life cycle.

AGILE INCREASES EFFICIENCY

Agile methodologies are preferred and encouraged within the Government. It has proven useful when used for IT development and engineering contracts to capitalize on flexibility and speed. The use of Agile is very beneficial when used in acquisition support as well.

Agile acquisition support allows teams to identify and quickly address any potential hurdles early in the acquisition life cycle and provide working templates, lessons learned, and repeatable procedures. This is a way to do more with less given today's economic environment, speeding time to Return on Investment (ROI) and mitigating risk.

There is ample information available within federal agencies and in the public domain explaining Agile Acquisitions in regards to Software Development and Systems Engineering. This paper applies Agile methodology specifically to cradle-to-grave (little "a") acquisition support. This is called "Agile Acquisition Support." To fully implement an Agile Acquisition Support Methodology, one must understand what Agile Acquisition Support is, who the participants are, and how Agile Acquisition Support works.

WHAT IS AGILE ACQUISITION SUPPORT?

Agile Acquisition Support (AST) is the use of Agile methodologies to support federal requiring activities, acquisition management teams and contracting activities. Agile increases productivity, efficiency, accountability, and traceability. It is useful for any stage in the acquisition life cycle. It is a stand-alone methodology, meaning that, although it may be intermingled with Agile acquisition methodologies used for engineering and development contracts, its use is independent and can stand alone. Because it's not dependent on IT Agile acquisition methodologies, it can be used for simple acquisitions from the smallest product purchase, to very large acquisitions purchasing major systems.

The use of Agile methodology in Acquisition support mitigates most possible pitfalls. It's a much more organized and thorough approach. As seen in the figure below, it allows for potential hurdles to be addressed and overcome long before they become a major problem.

Agile Acquisition cycle diagram:
- Ongoing quality checks and daily statuses
- Close collaboration with all participants on a regular basis
- AST POCs assigned to specific government POCs
- Draft documents completed
- All participants reviewing: Corrections and re-work reduced
- Daily Reports on Progress and Plans
- AGILE ACQUISITION
- Finished Product? Yes / No
- Next Iteration
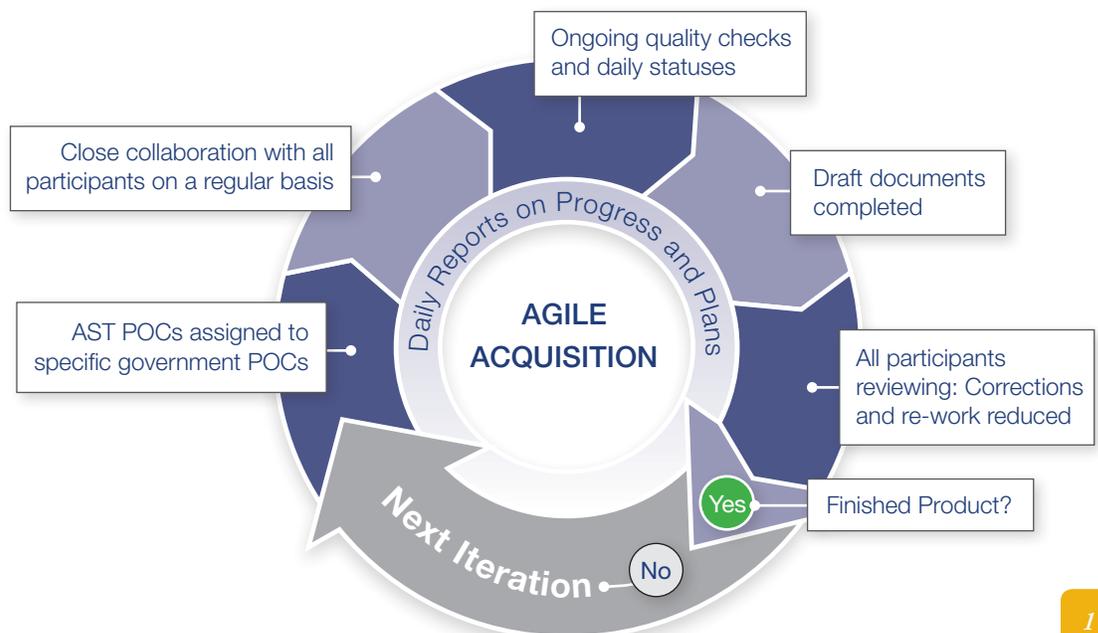
WHO ARE THE PARTICIPANTS?

In a traditional non-Agile acquisition team, team members usually only work with a couple of points of contact. This may entail just working with the contracting activity or just the requiring activity, for example. Knowledge sharing is limited due to the lack of diversity, and others who had a need to know may not even know the developments of the procurement package until a lot later (sometimes too late, which can further delay progress).

On the other hand, an Agile Acquisition Support Team will encounter and work with a number of participants and stakeholders who, when combined, have ample knowledge that assists in preparing a complete procurement package that will fully meet the Government's requirements upon award. These individuals include the requiring activity, functional and/or technical teams, the acquisition management staff, end users, the contracting activity, and the AST.

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AGILE PARTICIPANTS	
REQUIRING ACTIVITY	Is comprised of Program Directors, Program Analysts, and Contracting Officer Representatives (CORs) (current and future). These are the people who decide a service/product is required and request the necessary funding. Other participants within the requiring activity may include users as well as functional and technical teams. Most are Government personnel, but there may be contractor personnel providing program analysis, program management, or corporate support. The Requiring Activity identifies, analyzes, develops, and approves requirements and takes the necessary steps to properly request acquisition and contracting support.
FUNCTIONAL TEAM	Understands the functionality of a particular software, system, or product. The technical team, who should work in tandem with the functional team, helps make all the functional capabilities come to life through the use of technology.
USERS	The people who actually use or interface with the software, system, or product. They understand the most about what is needed for full operability or usability of any given product or service. The functional team understands this need and works with the technical teams to make it happen.
ACQUISITION MANAGEMENT TEAM	Is comprised of Government personnel who make the acquisition decisions for an agency. They include a Director(s) and Program and/or Acquisition Analysts. This function can be fulfilled by several individuals or one government person, depending on the size and quantity of acquisitions.
CONTRACTING ACTIVITY	Is comprised of Contracting Officers, Contract Specialists, and any other support personnel (either contractor or government). These individuals review the procurement packages and prepare the necessary paperwork in order to post Requests for Information (RFI), solicit industry/contract holders (via an RFQ or RFP), amend solicitations, execute contract awards, execute unilateral and bilateral modifications, extend contracts/orders, and exercise option periods.
ACQUISITION SUPPORT TEAM (AST)	Can be contractor, Government, or a combination of Government and contractor personnel. This team corresponds with the requiring activities/program offices as well as works with the contracting activity. The AST assists with requirements development, participates with acquisition planning, prepares procurement packages, prepares modification packages, assists with source selection boards/evaluation panels, and assists with contract close-outs for eligible contracts. This process is most efficient when AST members are aligned with programs and/or projects and will work with their respective program/project points of contact to assist with the development of various requirements and resultant contracts. The same AST members will assist with the administration of these same contracts as well as close-out/termination when applicable.

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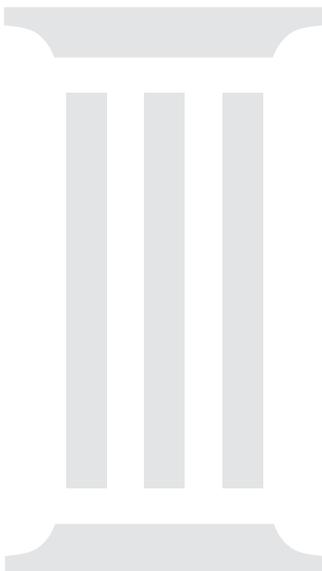
When Agile Acquisition Support is implemented, the AST will work collaboratively with all participants and provide updates daily. This methodology works somewhat like an Integrated Product Team (IPT) where all players are involved from the very beginning of the acquisition process to avoid confusion, duplication of effort, miscommunication, and/or misinterpretation. Although there are some traditional acquisition support teams that may provide daily updates, this practice is driven by personal preferences and is not something that is expected. With Agile Acquisition Support, however, it is adopted and implemented without fail.

HOW DOES AGILE ACQUISITION SUPPORT WORK?

Agile Acquisition Support works by

- Holding daily scrums so that the management team can remain fully aware of all team members' actions and statuses, fostering full accountability for all team members

- Collaborating closely with all participants and stakeholders, and

- Aligning with specific program/project areas for complete cradle-to-grave support.

Scrums

A scrum is a short meeting where participants discuss what they accomplished the day before, what they plan to accomplish that day, and any potential hurdles. Every team member is responsible for the details behind daily activities and keeps a daily log of some sort (the format is not important, as long as it's tracked and regularly updated). Scrums also give participants an opportunity to ask/answer questions and express concerns or bring up topics that may need to be discussed in more detail later that day.

The extra time spent participating in daily scrums and/or providing daily activity logs is more beneficial than not keeping track. Keeping track of activities prevents duplication of effort and allows for lessons learned to be readily shared and quickly addressed.

Scrums give team leads an opportunity to collaborate with the Task Manager and Subject

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Matter Expert(s) to report their daily activities and those of their team members. Team leads will, in turn, hold scrums with their team members or ask for daily reports. As many projects and requirements may need support, it's important to know who has accomplished what, future plans, and any hurdles that will need to be addressed.

Collaboration with Participants and Stakeholders

With traditional acquisition support, information and data is not readily available because the team only prepares documents based on limited knowledge. By closely collaborating with all participants and stakeholders, the AST is able to acquire ample information and data and get a lot more questions answered quickly and accurately. During scrums, team members can discuss the information each team member was able to gather and discuss a path forward for completion of the task at hand.

Close collaboration with participants and stakeholders (as well as fellow teammates and the management team) also helps to identify current and potential stumbling blocks. The team has the opportunity to identify these stumbling blocks and discuss ways to resolve or prevent them. Also, risks can be identified and mitigated when teams collaborate regularly.

Cradle-to-Grave Support

Traditional "cradle-to-grave" support entails the ability to support various activities within the acquisition life cycle, and no action is taken to ensure proper knowledge transfer.

With the use of Agile Acquisition Support, however, one AST point of contact is the primary point of contact for contract actions for certain assigned contracts (whether they all be within a certain program area, COR, or contracting office — this will depend on Government preferences). The benefits of aligning staff with a certain program area, COR or contracting office include:

- Saving the Government valuable time by not having to re-explain the history of a requirement or contract

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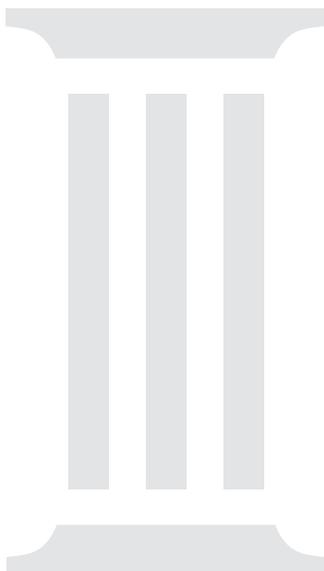
- Preventing the loss of valuable information, documents, or files due to errors that can occur while transferring knowledge and/or documents

- Encouraging assigned staff to fully know and understand their "accounts" as the primary and secondary points of contact.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF AGILE ACQUISITION SUPPORT?

Agile acquisition support is more productive than acquisition support done the "old way" because it utilizes the necessary resources when and where they are required. This methodology:

1. *Encourages efficiency and productivity* as management remains fully aware of every team member's actions: Daily "scrums" reports, whether verbally or in writing, help keep management teams up-to-date on daily activities to better inform and engage the client and foresee potential hurdles or areas where increased collaboration would be most useful

2. *Minimizes duplication of effort:* Daily scrums/reports allow full visibility for management teams to know who's doing what to avoid duplication of effort, overworking any one team member, etc.

3. *Fosters version control of documentation:* Close collaboration among team members lets them share on an ongoing basis versions in circulation and communicate who holds the "master" document

4. *Mitigates repeated mistakes/helps repeat successes:* Lessons learned are recorded and discussed daily; feedback is given quickly which enables speedy corrections

5. *Helps manage workload:* Work is more easily disbursed as management teams are fully engaged on a daily basis of everyone's workload and activities. This assists with planning work assignments

6. *Facilitates the gathering of information:* By knowing who's working on what and what they know on a daily basis, management

teams are better able to assist other team members with information they know another team member may have

7. *Prevents inaccuracies:* Second-eye reviews allow for another fresh set of eyes to look at the document from the customer's point of view. This helps the team catch and correct inaccuracies or areas needing clarification prior to submission to the customer

8. *Promotes full accountability and traceability among team members* due to the daily input and updates each team member provides: Team members have an obligation to continually keep track of their progress and think of next steps and future activities so that the management team remains aware of the value of their support to the customer and contributions to the team as a whole.

9. *Promotes regular meetings with the client:* Demonstrates added value and keeps them appraised of status

10. *Helps team members to always be ready to discuss their work* (and possibly the accomplishments of others) with the client at any time.

AGILE ACQUISITION SUPPORT IS THE FUTURE

In its July 2012 report, "Effective Practices and Federal Challenges in Applying Agile Methods," the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recognized that a growing number of federal agencies are using Agile techniques to develop and purchase software. It also recommended that Agile practices be highlighted as part of the government's overall effort to promote modular development (as outlined in the June 2012 "Contracting Guidance to Support Modular Development"). Further, the GAO found that effective Agile practices align with best practices in project management activities such as "strategic planning, organizational commitment and collaboration, preparation, execution, and evaluation."

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Recognizing the government's desire to reduce investment risk and speed the delivery of needed solutions, Integrity expects to see an increasing use of the Agile methodology not only in IT development, but also as applied to acquisition support. The use of Agile methodologies enables acquisition support activities to be more efficient, while also ensuring communication is more frequent and transparent. And of equal importance, it greatly reduces risk by providing feedback early and often to ensure issues are identified and resolved quickly before more investment dollars are spent.

AGILE ACQUISITION IN ACTION

Integrity Management Consulting, Inc. has been successfully using Agile Acquisition Support at the Program Executive Office (PEO) Defense Healthcare Management Systems (DHMS), where Integrity provides both Acquisition and Budget Finance support. This overall team is comprised of a Program Manager, an Acquisition Support Team Lead, Finance Team Lead, Senior Acquisition Specialists, Senior Financial Analysts, Acquisition Analysts, and Financial Analysts.

During daily morning scrums, the management team reports the activities completed the previous day plus current plans for the day. It's also an opportunity to discuss any potential hurdles or issues that should be communicated with the Government.

The AST Lead collaborates continually with each team member regarding acquisition support accomplishments and efforts. Each team member is assigned to specific program/project areas, and these areas have their own requirements and contracts. This allows for the AST to assign one single point of contact who provides acquisition and contract support throughout the life of a requirement/contract to include pre-award, award, contract administration, and expiration/termination/close-out. The AST submitted to the Government an "AST Alignment Chart" that they refer to whenever they need to know who supports which program/project and contract. This eliminates the need for the Government to have to re-explain information pertaining to a contract. Since the AST is involved throughout the entire life cycle of a contract, they are already privy to the details, which saves the Government time. Contract actions can move at a quicker pace without compromising quality.

The AST provides the AST Lead with daily updates. The AST Lead reviews the daily updates and contacts each team member when needed in order to get clarification, provide feedback, ask questions, and provide recommendations. It's a very proactive approach to management; the AST Lead knows what the AST is working on every day and can quickly address any issues that may come up or reassign work when/if a particular team member has to be out of the office.

This approach to acquisition support has been successful, meeting and exceeding the Government's expectations. Since the focus on Agile Acquisition Support was implemented in earnest in August 2013, the monthly government satisfaction reports rose from an eleven-month pre-implementation average of 3.18 to the sustained follow-on six-month average of 4.0 on a 5.0 point scale. Exceeding government expectations requires knowing your client, empowering your team, incorporating flexibility, demonstrating agility, and implementing a cooperative and collaborative environment for success — all proven tenets of the Agile acquisition methodology.

ABOUT INTEGRITY MANAGEMENT CONSULTING

Integrity Management Consulting, Inc. is an award-winning provider of acquisition, program, financial and investment management support services that enable federal agencies to efficiently and effectively manage their programs.

Integrity supports a wide range of federal agencies, contributing to missions of national importance in defense, homeland security, and health services. Our extraordinary team of credentialed and cleared subject matter experts solves complex challenges with innovative strategies that save time and money. Integrity is committed to advancing the acquisition and program management discipline through ongoing dialogue and thought leadership.

Headquartered in Northern Virginia, Integrity serves federal government clients nationwide with numerous contract vehicles that ensure fast and flexible service.

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