How government agencies can achieve their goals through enterprise agile transformation

Digital.ai Agility becomes first enterprise agile planning solution to achieve FedRAMP Moderate “In Process” status
If you’ve ever attempted to lead an agile transformation across a large organization, you’ve probably run into challenges not directly addressed in the Agile Manifesto. And when seeking help, you’ve likely been exposed to the inconsistent (and often expensive) counsel of different advisors who seem to agree on one piece of advice: “It depends.”

Agile transformations are complex endeavors, and without a clear understanding of what enterprise agile entails, your agile transformation is at risk of failure. This paper draws upon our nearly two decades of guiding organizations through successful agile transformations. It will deepen your understanding of enterprise agile and better prepare you to lead and participate in a successful transformation at your organization.

We will address:

- What is enterprise agile?
- Questions commonly asked by enterprise agile leaders within government
- Clear advice for getting the results you want from your transformation
- How a secure, cloud-hosted FedRAMP “In Process” enterprise agile planning solution enables agencies to scale beyond team-level agile practices, improving visibility across the organization

Digital.ai is the first organization to achieve FedRAMP Moderate “In Process” Status for an Enterprise Agile Planning Solution with Digital.ai Agility.

This achievement ensures that Digital.ai Agility meets the rigorous FedRAMP compliance standards and enables government agencies leverage a secure, cloud-hosted solution to scale agile practices beyond individual teams and across agencies. This capability is critical for any agency looking to gain a complete view of software development and delivery initiatives across the entire organization.
**What is enterprise agile?**

Scaling agile is not the same thing as enterprise agile.

Today, organizations around the globe practice team-level agile where a small, cross-functional, and highly responsive team incrementally creates and delivers valuable, working software. Many of those organizations have scaled their agile capacity by creating additional cross-functional teams — often collected into programs around a common mission or product area. But even in such circumstances, you’ll typically find that agile values and practices are still confined to just part of the organization’s processes. **While enterprise agile usually entails scaling agile, enterprise agile encompasses much more than just scaling.**

**What is enterprise agile?**

In addition to the activities directly involved in the creation of products, an enterprise also includes operational and strategic concerns. Enterprise agile applies agile values and principles to all elements of the business in order to ensure continual alignment, collaboration, and synchronization. Enterprise agile is anchored in the same core principles and values that make teams successful.

Across every facet of the organization, an agile enterprise values:

- Individuals and interactions
- Working software
- Responsiveness to change
- Cross-team collaboration

Because it involves all aspects of the organization, and because digital transformations often involve complex “systems of systems,” enterprise agile transformations are rarely easy. Let’s take a look at the common questions we hear with respect to enterprise agile, and at the practices that have helped our federal customers, as well as our state and local partners, be more successful in their transformations.

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**Scaling agile**

- People communicating
- People working together

**Enterprise agile**

- Building transformation
- Building collaboration
Common questions

“What if leadership isn’t on board?”

The annual State of Agile™ survey consistently reports that the single-most significant factor in a successful agile transformation is strong executive sponsorship.

Fact: poor executive sponsorship does not bode well for success.

Enterprise agile is really about the agility of your agency. The broader and deeper agile is adopted across the organization, the more senior leadership must go beyond “supporting” agile to actively leading and participating. Nowhere is this more critical than in dealing with changes that affect mid-level tiers of management, where the effects of an agile transformation can be felt most.

Successful enterprise agile transformations depend upon senior organizational leadership visibly, vocally, and actively leading the charge.

In an agile enterprise, parts of the organization that had traditionally communicated via documentation and handoffs must now work collaboratively. The vision for this collaboration and synchronization throughout the enterprise must be actively owned and demonstrated by senior leadership.

Executive-level leaders have a tremendous influence on organizational culture and whether or not that culture is conducive to learning and continuous improvement. Overcoming impediments to organizational change has to start with those leaders because they are the ones most empowered to do so, and because their behavior is modeled by others.

Facilitated workshops that are tailored to executives and are respectful of their limited time can be effective in fostering enthusiasm for developing business agility. Focusing on the business case for agile and agile leadership can help bridge the gap between understanding and action.
Common questions

“What if the entire organization isn’t agile?”

It is common for some areas of an organization to be agile, while other parts of that organization are not. This situation could be widespread, resulting from decentralized management of different organizational units. Or it could be simply the consequence of an agile enterprise having critical interactions with teams or suppliers outside of the organization. This situation may be transitional, or maybe it’s just the way things are going to be. Whatever the reason, you need to be able to collaborate effectively with other parts of the organization whether they are agile or not.

Here are some tips for improving enterprise collaboration:

- **Invite those outside of the agile enterprise** to planning meetings, daily standups, reviews, and retrospectives. This can be very effective in establishing common ground and influencing the culture.

- **Agree on mutual “organizational interfaces”** between areas of the organization that need to exchange information, but where the methods of obtaining and expressing that information are different. This can be very important in the communication of metrics.
Common questions

“Aren’t compliance and traceability non-agile?”
Organizations are often subject to various constraints requiring compliance and traceability. Even if you aren’t in a regulated industry, you may still be required to adhere to auditable internal policies.

Agile’s emphasis on conversation over documentation can be seen as incompatible with process compliance and traceability. But the need to show traceability isn’t necessarily at odds with agile. It’s all in how you go about it.

Sometimes it’s as straightforward as updating existing process documentation to reflect more recently adopted agile practices. Also, consider the timing of when certain things are documented, and opportunities to leverage automated tooling.

“Which transformation approach should we use?”
There are different ways to approach transformation to an agile enterprise. These range from well-documented, contemporary frameworks to homegrown approaches born purely out of trial and error, and everything in between.

Enterprises are complex and require a versatile array of capabilities to be successful. Agile and scrum are not what your customers and stakeholders are demanding from you. They need you to help them solve their problems, which requires understanding and flexibility to adapt agile to their specific needs.

All successful approaches are based on a common set of core principles, but there is no single “right” way to go about it. Each organization has unique goals, constraints, and challenges. When seeking advice, make sure you are working with someone who can help you devise a transformation strategy that fits your organization.

“But we’re agile!” is not an acceptable excuse when auditors come around. Offering up such a defense is one of the surest ways to have the plug pulled on your agile transformation.

The best approach for your organization is one that is uncompromising in principle, but adaptive in practice. It has to be agile, and it has to work for you.
Common questions

“How do we manage human resources in an agile enterprise?”

With team-level agile, a team of stable composition works against a product backlog. “Resource management” is really a non-issue. Enterprise agile often involves many interdependent teams and competing opportunities for investment, which makes the subject much more complex.

Backlog management remains agile’s primary means of aligning work with people. The agile human resource is the team — not the individual team member. How teams are allocated can change over time as investment is strategically adjusted.

Since teams are not infinitely available, and since the work they do costs money, it’s very important to have visibility into how the financial and human resource landscape matches up with the portfolio strategy. This visibility is critical to maintaining the link between planning and execution, and it provides information needed to make responsible decisions regarding investment allocation and scope management.

Strategic alignment of teams and investment-focused planning can greatly simplify the resource planning challenge in an agile enterprise. That is because projections can be based on historical throughput trends and funding can be centered on strategic themes.

Human resource management across the entire organization can be especially challenging in a mixed environment where agile and non-agile parts of the organization are required to use the same project and portfolio management (PPM) methodology. Under such circumstances, it isn’t normally an option to completely abandon the existing PPM system. Rather, you can establish interfaces that standardize information flow between different parts of the organization and the PPM system, allowing different groups to continue working in a way that makes sense for them, while giving those responsible for high-level oversight the information they need. These interfaces are commonly both organizational interfaces (as described earlier) and software interfaces.

“Won’t enterprise governance destroy self-organization?”

An agile organization requires the ability to coordinate, synchronize, and have meaningful visibility into collections of teams across multiple initiatives. This can create friction if the teams feel that higher-level oversight infringes on their ability to self-organize.

We appreciate this from both sides. We know that, across an organization, the concerns and needs of strategic players differ drastically from those of the team, even though the overarching vision is the same. And it isn’t unusual for portfolio and program managers to naturally favor standardization over self-organization.

In an agile organization, there’s a delicate balance between collective oversight and team-level empowerment. Thriving agile organizations continually strive to maintain “just enough,” while allowing teams to work in a way that is best for them.

Providing reasonable agile enterprise guidance is helpful in both facilitating the necessary alignment and coordination of all aspects of the organization, and making sure teams understand how they will need to interface with the rest of the organization. One proven means of accomplishing this is by establishing an agile center of excellence that is focused on advocating practices that enable, rather than constrain.

One goal of implementing agile at any scale in an organization should be to create a learning organization with a continuous focus on learning and adapting to new circumstances.
Common questions

“Can enterprise agile work with distributed teams?”

Enterprise agile often entails distributed teams — whether down the hall, across town, or around the world from each other. Face-to-face communication is easy when teams are co-located, but much more difficult when teams working toward the same goal are located multiple time zones apart.

The first step is to ensure that the teams are truly cross-functional. For instance, avoid putting the development team in one location and the QA team in another.

The teams should have a common understanding of the shared vision they are collectively serving, and then self-organize to determine the best way to sustain cross-team collaboration. Where there is significant distance between teams, it can help to periodically rotate the real-time collaboration time slots. This allows all teams to share the burden of being inconvenienced, but in shorter doses.

You can also enhance collaboration (and traceability) through electronic tooling that allows communication within the context of the work being planned and executed.

“Are we really ready for this?”

A few organizations claim to have success with big-bang implementations. But we find those to be in the minority. And even then, the details usually tell a different story.

As we mentioned earlier, engaged senior leadership is mission-critical. Organizational readiness is another factor in your success.

Teams that aren’t functioning well individually don’t work well together collectively. They simply constitute a collection of teams that aren’t functioning at a high level, and the grouping of these teams only amplifies any dysfunction. In order for teams to function well collectively, they must first become capable individual teams through excellent foundational training and post-training guidance.

The need for training and guidance also applies to organizational leadership. The most robust agile enterprises we’ve seen are those that received thorough training and practical guidance at the mid- and senior-levels of leadership.

Beyond initial training and coaching, readiness also involves cultivating a culture of continual retrospection and improvement.

Remember that enterprise agile isn’t just about team, project, program, or even portfolio agility; it’s about the agility of your organization. This means that all aspects of the organization must be on board, committed, and properly trained and coached. Don’t just send your developers to agile training and expect that the remaining parts of the organization will join the effort and learn as they go. This approach, in our experience, sets the stage for a difficult transformation.

What makes distributed teams work?

- Cross-functional teams
- Common understanding of the shared vision
- Rotating the burden of inconvenience
- Integrated workflow and collaboration tools
What works?

Based on our experience with more than 100,000 teams at 1,000+ customers, here’s a list of proven contributors to digital successful transformation:

Establish committed executive leadership. Active participation by executives is the most common success factor. It’s not just tacit endorsement of “whatever works,” but rather, proactive advocacy of agile to enable organizational agility, and ensuring that all aspects of the enterprise are able to collaborate, synchronize, and learn. The value of executive leadership in the organization’s transformation team and its agile center of excellence cannot be overstated.

Provide consistent team training across all parts of the organization. Teams are the foundation of agile at any level of scale. Organizations that invest in high-quality, consistent agile training across all of their teams are more likely to succeed in an agile enterprise. This includes not only training in agile values and concepts, but also in agile engineering practices.

Provide competent post-training guidance. Get assistance from someone who has been through this before. Advice and coaching should be available to all teams across all aspects of the enterprise, with the goal of developing internal advisors and coaches along the way. This also helps you avoid perpetual dependency on consultants.

Standardize on tooling that supports the way you work. Make sure that the tools you use enhance, rather than impede, your organizational agility, and that they integrate well with each other. Also, do what you can to eliminate redundant tooling, as it can require multiple entry, which can discourage tool use and produce unreliable information. Your enterprise agile platform should support planning, tracking, and reporting at the highest level. If it does not, look for an alternative.

Get process guidance that’s focused on your organization’s success. The way you work needs to be uncompromisingly agile, but it has to work for you. It’s unwise to view every organization through the lens of one particular methodology or framework. Get guidance from a source who acts as your partner and who understands your organization’s culture, constraints, and goals.

Provide consistent leadership training across all parts of the digital transformation. Although self-organization is a mainstay of agile, enterprise agile encompasses multiple organizational dimensions beyond the scope of any single team. Individuals in various levels of leadership must know how to be facilitative, business-oriented leaders with an agile mindset.

Conduct a successful pilot. A common theme among successful agile organizations is that they identified a program area to start with, and then expanded from there. Success doesn’t mean perfection out of the blocks. It entails continuous improvement through learning what works and what doesn’t. Pilots provide learning opportunities that can be leveraged as the scope of agility broadens throughout the organization. It should also integrate with and facilitate DevOps. Without that capability, the process of delivering frequently to your customers will be disjointed and error-prone, resulting in throttled throughput, security reduction, and increased cost.

About Digital.ai

Digital.ai enables enterprises to focus on outcomes instead of outputs, create greater business value faster, and deliver secure digital experiences their customers trust. The Digital.ai Value Stream Platform seamlessly integrates all the disparate tools and processes across the various value streams, uses data and AI/ML to create connective tissue between them, and provides the real-time, contextual insights required to drive and sustain successful digital transformation. With Digital.ai, enterprises have the visibility they’ve been seeking to deliver value, drive growth, increase profitability, reduce security risk, and improve customer experience.

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