

Agile Project Skills

This week, we are exploring the nature of agile project management. This article is an interview with John Vitelli, CEO of Chicago Allways Networks. John's company is a big proponent of agile project management and uses these methods regularly. We asked John to tell us what types of projects skills are needed for the successful completion of agile projects.

PM: *Is there really a difference in the type of skills needed for development when using agile methods as opposed to a more traditional approach? Isn't it the case that a good manager can create a good product with any kind of method or team?*

Vitelli: It's true that a good manager can apply a strong process of checks, balances, and oversight to catch and correct the errors caused by less-skilled team members. But, why would you want to go that route when the best way to ensure the best result is to work with excellent people and a project management approach that is right for the type of project?

PM: *How do you go about selecting a skilled team?*

Vitelli: A key part of building the team is an up-front analysis of the roles and responsibilities required to deliver the product. You ask, "How many developers, coders, system architects, and business analysts will this effort require?" You look at exactly what each team member is expected to contribute. This analysis gives you a realistic assessment of the requirements for the team. Then, you pick people who meet those requirements.

PM: *I read somewhere that you distinguish between project management and project leadership. How would this differ between traditional and agile approaches?*

Vitelli: Traditional project management is focused on predicting the activities and tasks required, building a comprehensive project plan, estimating the budget and schedule, and controlling the resources to ensure that they progress as expected. In the agile environment, leadership and enablement are the more important skills. Not that process management skills are not important—they are essential to the project too. I don't mean to imply that leadership, coaching, collaborating, and mentoring skills are not important in traditional project management either. But, in the self-directed environment of agile project management, the ability to influence, motivate, and mentor a self-sufficient team of developers

becomes even more critical to project success.

PM: *What kind of people do you pick to lead agile projects?*

Vitelli: Leaders possess an array of supplementary skills and attributes. They have the experience to know when to manage closely and when to back off and allow contributors space to bring creativity to the effort. They use influence rather than authority to encourage progress and quality, display integrity and trust rather than the manipulative skills often displayed by authoritative bosses, and have the confidence to encourage change and experimentation. They need to know when to end the experiments and decide to follow a specific path. They need collaborative skills to work with diverse teams of developers and users and to encourage partnership and compromise without making concessions that damage quality and fitness.

PM: *Do you always find the right leaders?*

Vitelli: Of course, the qualities I want for an agile team leader are easy to describe, but can be difficult to find. In my company, we foster these skills in managers who hope to migrate to an agile environment, even though we, and they, know that they will fall short at times.

PM: *In closing, can you summarize the skills needed to be successful in an agile environment?*

Vitelli: Yes. Analytical, mentoring, facilitative, leadership, and management skills are required to be successful in an agile environment.