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Top 10 indications that you moved up from offshore staff augmentation into Agile software development

by Raja Bavani

Offshore staff augmentation is all about engineers staffed at offshore locations and treated as augmented team members reporting into an onsite lead or manager. While offshore staffing serves short-term tactical goals, it requires extensive one-to-one interactions and consumes significant communication and coordination overheads. As a result the team members continue to remain order takers and do not find opportunities to understand the big picture in order to create value to stakeholders. Even though there may be good reasons to start an engagement in an offshore staffing model, there are compelling benefits when stakeholders evolve it to the next level so that the offshore team becomes agile in executing projects. In software product engineering as well as in outsourced product development, Agile has been the mantra of success for several years. Moving up from offshore staff augmentation is a collective decision of project stakeholders. At MindTree we have collaborated with our partners in moving up the value chain. This requires lot of trust, support, collaboration and meticulous governance. Here are the top 10 indications that you moved up from offshore staff augmentation into Agile software development.

- 1. Shared Vision:** The executive sponsor and governance team members have collaboratively drafted and established a shared vision among distributed team members. This has helped the senior leadership at each location to sensitize team members at regular intervals with the right context and shared vision. Without this, team members tend to restrict themselves to transactional engineering activities without relating their work to the overall business needs of project sponsors.
- 2. Base Camp & Planned Visits:** Some of the offshore team members have been through a base camp and there are planned visits by key team members across shores.

In case of distributed Agile projects, setting up the base camp is absolutely essential in order to put the right foot forward. Setting up the base camp involves forming a seed

team (with at least 1 project manager, 1 or 2 technical leads and a handful of engineers). Typically, members of this seed team are selected from distributed locations. They come together and spend 4 to 8 weeks, depending on the size of the project, at a central location where the project initiates from. During this time they decide on project infrastructure, guidelines and execute the first iteration. They also establish a clear understanding of what to expect during the first few iterations or Sprints.

Setting up the base camp and facilitating planned visits provide several benefits. On the project execution front, a base camp provides an opportunity to have adequate clarity on the technical environment, tools and key engineering processes. On the people front, a base camp and planned visits provide opportunities for rapport building. This can ensure better efficiency in the resolution of issues and conflicts during the project. Overall, this provides an opportunity to start distributed Agile projects on the right foot.

- 3. Collaborative Governance:** There exists a collaborative governance mechanism and it facilitates efficient reviews, issue resolution and decision making. Besides there is perpetual support and encouragement from senior leaders across sites in conducting governance reviews at regular intervals.

The word governance originated from the Greek verb κυβερνώ (kubernáo), which means 'to steer'. It was used for the first time in a metaphorical sense by Plato. In general, governance means a mechanism that includes a group of people (or committees or departments etc.) who make up a body for the purpose of administering something and hence to make the best decisions in a timely manner. In case of software projects executed at a single location it has been a general practice to implement a governance mechanism at three levels namely project level, program level and organizational level. In case of projects executed across multiple geographies and time zones with employees of the project

sponsor organization, external vendors and independent contractors, the complexity of governance increases multi-fold. Hence it is absolutely essential to form a governance team that comprises of representatives from onsite as well as offshore and works together as a single body at global level in order to run distributed projects successfully. Governance has been one of the key success factors in distributed projects and it is going to provide the necessary foundation and support in future as well.

- 4. Structured Team:** The offshore team is a structured team with a lead or manager. Team members have clarity regarding their roles and responsibilities. Everyone in the offshore team knows what everyone else does in the team. Key team members visit other locations a couple of times a year for knowledge sharing and team bonding. Besides, team members are empowered to make decisions.

Many times, practitioners tend to embrace Agile principles and recommend a self-directed team of offshore engineers that can work with an onsite manager. For very small teams of 1 or 2 engineers that do monotonous work, such as bug fixing or maintenance of end-of-life non-critical products, it may be possible to manage with a remote project manager. However, in all other cases, you will need to structure that team in such a way that it gets adequate local leadership and managerial support to deliver the best. If you follow Scrum, you will need a local Scrum Master for every project. Else, you may need a lead or a manager to support your local team to deliver the desired behavior.

- 5. Infrastructure & Collaboration Tools:** The offshore team has adequate infrastructure support for day-to-day communication with remote teams. Team members have access to Internet Messenger (IM), phone, and video conferencing, in addition to email communication, and are aware of efficient ways to utilize Internet Messenger or phone or video conferencing. Both onsite and offshore teams have access to a centralized version control system and adhere to the same set of build process and corresponding build scripts. Continuous integration is practiced consistently. Besides, both onsite and offshore teams use the same web-based tool for bug tracking, issue resolution and query resolution.

Having the right infrastructure and collaboration tools is essential to improve efficiency in distributed projects. When efficiency is a cause of concern, distributed projects undergo a lot of turbulence and escalations.

- 6. Agile Expertise:** Offshore team members do not perceive 'Agile' as a niche paradigm known to the remote customer only, nor do they tend to survive with inadequate preliminary awareness of Agile. They are well aware of Agile practices and have practiced Agile for more than six months. Offshore team members organize knowledge sharing sessions to discuss Agile best practices and share suggestions with customer teams. Also, the offshore team has the support

of Agile experts who can provide real time coaching when needed.

When you transition from offshore staffing to Agile, it is required to facilitate training programs and team building exercises to all team members and budget for additional team members with Agile expertise. Also, it is a best practice to form a team of Agile experts who can provide real time coaching to your team when needed.

- 7. Collaborative Planning, Execution and Retrospectives:** The offshore team members attend iteration planning meetings. Also, they follow a similar set of Agile practices as followed by the onsite teams.

Iterations are short (2 to 4 weeks), and offshore teams participate in estimation and prioritization of tasks. Working software is delivered at the end of each iteration and the team experiences continuous learning and improvement. While there is no change in iteration size, the overall execution model supports variations in scope in order to accommodate the priorities of stakeholders.

Offshore and onsite teams participate in retrospectives and come up with collective best practices and improvement areas. Retrospectives are no longer an onsite affair. Also, offshore teams participate in Root Cause Analysis (RCA) meetings and become a part of the root cause identification process.

- 8. Change Management:** Team members do not get daily task delegation emails from onsite leads or managers. There are no drastic changes to assigned tasks and the offshore team members do not have to do frequent context switching every day. Instead, team members embrace change swiftly with constructive discussions. Task assignment happens over a web-based tool that supports Agile software development. The scope of any iteration does not change during that iteration. Any exceptions are handled collaboratively by leaders across shores.

- 9. Unit Testing & Test Automation:** Team members practice unit testing and pursue test automation in order to improve productivity. They adhere to the processes and guidelines set for unit testing, test automation and any such engineering activities seamlessly.

- 10. Collective Code Ownership:** Everyone in the team understands the value of collective code ownership and more than 50% of the developers own the code during the first two or three iterations. There has been an increasing trend in the percentage of developers who know the entire code base and exhibit code ownership. Team members are willing to move across various categories of tasks in the project in order to meet project goals. It is very rare to find someone in the team who attempts to claim: "This is not my job."

Predominantly in the software product engineering arena, several instances of global software engineering initiatives start in the form of staff augmentation at a remote captive center or with an offshore service provider. Transitioning from offshore staffing into Agile software development improves the overall efficiency and throughput of the team. Also, it provides adequate ownership and satisfaction to project teams.

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