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What Do We Do If We Don't Have Budget for Product Owners and Scrum Masters? - SSA

Or “Doesn't having a full-time SM or PO result in a significant reduction in capacity?” Or “What happens if we are unable to assign a PO or SM to each team?” Or “What do we do if no one wants to be the Scrum Master or Product Owner?”

TL;DR Summary - Establish Agile Establish the Role of Product Owner and Scrum Master

And for those that don't want to read the whole article ...

The simplest (and most proven) way to address the of coaching to high performance, and ensuring the right stuff is being worked on is through the assignment of a Scrum Master and a Product Owner. When backed by proper training and support these roles will allow you to establish high performing teams which are focused on doing the most important work now.

Pragmatically it is sometimes not possible to staff these roles fully. If this is the case then you should also lower your expectations as to what you are going to get from your agile transformation. The impact is mostly felt in terms of how long it takes for things to get visibly better but might also result in a failure to improve at all. Not having these roles will also result in a your teams seeing problems, the very problems these roles we designed to address.

Context

Large organizations embark on an agile transformation to improve how they deliver value to customers. This is all good. However when we get into the nitty-gritty of an implementation, there are a number of concepts and ideas that just seem counter-intuitive which results in the thinking that some of these ideas will just have to be adapted to “our situation.”

One of those ideas is the idea that we have specialized roles. For example, at the team level we have the role of the Product Owner (PO) and the role of the Scrum Master (SM). “Common sense”, your intuition tells you “says that if I have a someone to take on the role of a full time Scrum Master and another the role of a full time Product Owner then I will have lost the capacity of two people per team, or we need to find budget for all these additional people.” And there are a lot of teams being formed, aren't there?

This, coupled with a limited understanding of why we have these roles (“a Scrum Master is just an administrator, right?”) results in a reluctance to properly establish these roles in the organization. For

example, organizations will opt to:

- Double and treble up the teams that Product Owners or Scrum Masters supports
- Add the responsibilities of Product Owner and Scrum Master to the existing roles (already busy) people already have (e.g. “QA person; you are now the Scrum Master!”)
- Combine the roles (e.g. “you are now the Product Owner and the Scrum Master”)
- Combinations these approaches

Don’t get me wrong. These approaches might be required to get started; we need to be pragmatic. But we need to be aware of the tradeoffs we make when we do something that is less than ideal. Our mindset needs to be that we feel bad about making these tradeoffs, rather than thinking we have made good decisions. And, by way of observation, after doing a lot of agile transformations

Large organizations seem to struggle more in identifying full-time Product Owners and Scrum Masters than small organizations despite the presumably even more limited availability of people in smaller organizations.

Why Do We Have the Product Owner and Scrum Master Roles?

Agile implementations, and Scrum in particular, created these roles for a reason; they are there to address specific problems that arise from more traditional approaches to delivering value:

- Scrum Master: Coach the agile team to high performance
- Product Owner: Single source of the priority of what we need to work on

So while these roles have a number of other responsibilities, agile implementations leverage these roles so that the team can deliver as a group far more of the right stuff than if they would be operating as a set of individuals without those roles.

The team literally operates at a level that is more than the sum of the parts.

Why do we have the role of a Scrum Master?

Traditional approaches assume the unit of production is the person. Agile approaches assume the unit of production is the team. The problem is that in order to become high performing you need to focus on the interactions between the people, not just the individuals themselves.

In other words you need a coach for the team, someone who takes responsibility for how the team is working together, helps protect the team from outside influences, helps the team address things that are getting in the way of their work, and generally support the team in their day to day activities.

This is the role of the Scrum Master.

Why do we have the role of a Product Owner?

Traditional approaches focused on the implementation of multiple projects where people were assigned to projects. The capacity of each individual was typically sliced so that X% was to be used by project X and Y% was to be used by project Y, and so on.

Problems arise when the portion of the allocation is used, but the output required by the project is not delivered. What does the person do? Work more on one project over another? Talk to their manager to determine priorities? The manager might also be the source of a third set of work ("our VP wants us to work on this now!") as might peers of the person ("could you just help me out on this?").

The result is that it was often left up to the individual to make the decision on what the most important item is. These decisions are made in isolation from others, from the projects, and from the business.

We need a way to get control of the work and to determine what the most important thing is that the team can be worked on.

This is the role of the Product Owner.

What Happens When We Do These Roles Well?

There are two effects on our ability to deliver value when we have these roles in place, and the people doing these roles operate as intended:

1. With a great Scrum Master, the team is able to deliver more: The team operates at a higher capacity than what each of the individuals on the team represents. For example, it is not uncommon to see improvements of 2X, 3X, even 5X over what the individual capacity of team members would indicate. If we have team made up of 8 people and they are operating at a 2X level as a result of coaching, then they are behaving like they are a team of 16 people from the perspective of their ability to deliver.
2. With a great Product Owner, the team is able to deliver more of the right kind of value: The Product Owner takes the input from the customers (is the voice of the customer), the business, other stakeholders (such as other teams, management, and so on) and creates a force ranked list of what is needed to be delivered by this team; a backlog. The team operates by pulling items from the backlog starting at the top of the list. All work comes from the backlog - there is one list. In this way we have a clear view of the value we need to deliver and can help the team focus on the most important thing.

By having great Scrum Masters and Product Owners we are able to deliver more value faster

Better and more value delivered; not a bad return on your investment for identifying a Scrum Master and a Product Owner.

What Happens When We Have Partial Assignments for Product Owners and Scrum Masters?

It might seem obvious, and it is, that if we don't set up the role of Product Owner and Scrum Master for success then you can expect the problems the roles was intended to address will remain:

- Without a Product Owner ensuring that there is a single prioritized view of the work, team members will build more of the wrong thing, and the on the people will build less due to interruptions as a result of priority switching
- Without a Scrum Master working toward the development of a high performing team, the there will be no one to focus on how the team members work together to deliver more and so limited improvement in the apparent capacity of the team.

The result is that you end up with an agile (Scrum) implementation that doesn't provide the benefits you are looking for.

Most agile implementations are not as black and white as this. Reality is that organization do want to go agile but sometimes do not see how they can get there without also cutting a few corners. The selection of the role of Product Owner and Scrum Masters is one of those places that people often cut corners usually by saying that Scrum Masters and Product Owners will be part time either by doubling up the teams they need to support or by indicating that they will only use 50% of their capacity to fulfill the role.

The impacts of this type of approach, assuming that the people selected are trying hard to fulfill the roles include:

- Impacts the transformation to agile (Scrum):
 - You will see a slower adoption of agile: Being part time means that it will take longer to "get there".
- No true change: In some cases you will see no true change as being part time means that people will focus either on areas they are comfortable or the easy stuff. From example:
 - A dual role Scrum Master and developer, will default to solving development issues, and avoid the messy but necessary soft work required to create a high performing team.
 - A dual role Product Owner and manager will default to being an "order (from stakeholders) taker" and "order (to the team) giver" of the backlog and avoid the real work of being proactive about determining the most important thing and being the voice of the customer.
- You will see more resistance to change. The message "we want you to be agile, but we are not going to staff the job properly by fully staffing key roles" will result in the rest of the organization treating this change in a similar way. After all, if the leadership is unable to make this happen then why should we?
- There can be a reduction in performance as you now have lost capacity as the assigned Product Owners and Scrum Masters try to support the change by doing their role; setting up and attending new meetings (daily standup, planning, review, and retrospective), and creating and managing new artifacts (backlog, user stories, etc.). The result is that the Product Owner and Scrum Master are

not working directly on the delivery of value; and so the fear of lost capacity has actually become a reality.

If you don't establish the role well, you risk having all the overhead of agile (Scrum) and none of the benefits.

Practically speaking the usual impact will be a serious slow down in receiving the expected benefits of your agile (Scrum) transformation in most cases. This makes sense. With agile we are putting in place a new system to deliver value. That system is made up of a series of interlocking parts. When you do not completely supply the parts, you can expect there to be an impact on your new system of delivery.

What Alternatives to the Creation of Product Owner and Scrum Master Roles Could We Try?

The role of Product Owner and Scrum Master were established to deal with specific issues. This means that if you decide not to use these roles, or if you decide that those assigned to these roles are working part time, then you still potentially have these problems and will need to work to overcome them.

Thinking about the Scrum Master role of working toward a high performing team. Experience tells us that if we want a high performing team, we will need someone to coach that team (try to think of a successful sports team without a coach). It's not that our people are not professional. It's just that their perspective is not "how is the team interacting to produce value?" If you do not use a Scrum Master for this, then how will this get done?

Some organizations use managers for this function but there are problems with this approach. Firstly managers are often very busy and cannot dedicate the time required to really build a high performing team. Secondly organizations find the way team members interact with managers is different to how they will interact with peers. The result is that it can be difficult for managers to impact the team in the right way.

Thinking about the Product Owner roles of providing a single view of the most important things a team could work on. Again the problem doesn't just go away if we don't set up a Product Owner. By setting up the Product Owner role we also encourage a change in the process. So, for example, when someone comes directly to a team member asking for something specific, it is easy for that person to say "Talk to the Product Owner".

Some organizations create a process around the the intake system and, instead of having a single Product Owner, they set up a group who is responsible for determining the prioritized backlog. This group then meets regularly to deal with changes, new incoming items, and updates as a result of work.

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Want to Know More?

- [What is the Role of a Product Owner?](#)
- [What is the Role of a Scrum Master?](#)
- [What Should We Consider When Forming a New Team?](#)

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