

An Agile Approach to Onboarding

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ABSTRACT

A discussion on how we can better onboard people new to the life sciences industry whether they be Industrial Placement students, Graduates, or Career Changers by taking an Agile approach. When first entering the pharmaceutical industry, there are many new and complex areas to learn and understand in order to perform in your new role. For example, CDISC standards, ICH guidelines, Numerous SOPs, and Working instructions. It can happen that people new to industry become overwhelmed or de-motivated in their ability to be successful. I will explore how an Agile mindset and adapting tools from the Agile methodology can keep new industry starters more engaged and get them contributing to deliverables with reduced downtime.

INTRODUCTION

Personally, having only recently become a Line Manager for the first time after a career built upon training my peers and supporting the development of others, I saw an opportunity to Try a new approach to the onboarding process for a more person centric approach, utilising my experience with the Agile software development approach to build an onboarding strategy that looks to accelerate the development of new to industry starters and increase engagement and satisfaction.

Onboarding must be a priority in any organisation that want to reduce turnover. For an organization that is looking to onboard new to industry starters there are additional challenges in the highly process driven and highly regulated environment we work in. Within data analytics in the life sciences industry there has been increased adoption of an agile methodology [1] for the development of new applications and changes in ways of working. I will discuss in this paper how we can leverage that experience as Line Managers to better onboard new starters especially those that are new to industry.

ONBOARDING CHALLENGES

Onboarding new starters is a burden to both industry and new starters themselves in our highly regulated and process driven industry. This is especially acute when onboarding career young or new to industry employees where the burden of onboarding can be detrimental to retention if not managed properly. Turnover and retention costs not only in cash but also efficiency and loss of momentum on projects. New to industry starters are more likely to leave their role in the first year and a lot of this can be attributed to the first six months onboarding period. Over burdening new starters with various eLearnings delivered without context and a hundred item checklist to work through in their first six months could lead to demotivation and questioning whether the industry is right for them.

BURDEN OF ONBOARDING

Onboarding is a burden to both the new starter and the department, so it is important to recognise that onboarding does reduce the team efficiency in the short term. But that does not mean we can deprioritise onboarding to focus on projects. Every new starter onboarded due to a resource shortfall by not engaging them with the project we waste that resource. One example was a new to industry starter who was informed they should read the ADaM implementation Guide, a reference document some hundred pages long, before starting to work on producing dataset to the ADaM standard. this is a clear example of a pointless task that was given to a new starter due to lack of planning for onboarding them onto a project.

AGILE METHODOLOGY

As the usage of agile methodology for software development becomes more embeded into the development of data analytics, applications and projects, it is worth considering the applications of those skills in other areas of our role. At the centre of the Agile methodology is the ability to adapt to change. By recongnising that self-organised multi-disciplinary teams can work together to deliver faster and with more focus than the waterfall method of having a project lead who set outs the vision and the roadmap for the development. Consider if during the onboarding of new starters, we instead adopted the agile mindset that onboarding onto the project is a collaboration where instead of having a checklist of tasks that must be completed, we collaborate using the tools from the Agile methodology in order to accelerate their development and increase engagement.

PROGRAM INCREMENT (PI) PLANNING

Planning is the key when you bring a new starter into the team should be with an end goal in mind and a plan to get there. During PI planning the focus should be on your iterative plan. this should be based upon the role in mind for your new starter and onboarding onto the necessary application and processes to fulfil that role. Below I will present a few case studies to demonstrating what that planning could look like.

For example, say I have a new to industry graduate on a rotation within my team they are with us for a short period of time. We want to ensure the onboarding period is as accelerated as possible to enable the new starter to gain as much exposure and deliver the most value in the limited time. Knowing that graduates often come in with existing skills in R, I decided to ensure that time during the onboarding leveraged that previous experience to ensure they are contributing to parts of the project they find easier to adapt to while also supporting their onboarding onto SAS with more formal SAS trainings.

Another example is where we often have industrial placement (IP) students who join the company for one year during their degree. They often join with no industry experience and onboarding them is a fine balance between ensuring they are engaged and challenged while allowing them to adjust to the new environment within our project. We have periodic reporting of analysis for an independent data monitoring committee (iDMC) which is fairly routine by assigning the IP to this work it gives them that opportunity to contribute to the project while allowing them time to gain an understanding of the industry.

Both examples are just one part of the plan that was put in place for these new starters before they joined. the next section will cover how we adapt to accelerate onboarding and development.

SPRINTS REVIEW AND FEEDBACK

During PI planning you may be tempted to map out the first six months of onboarding but that would not leverage the iterative nature of the Agile methodology, where each iteration consists of four phases of PI Planning; Sprint where you actually deliver on the plan; Review the success of the sprint; and feedback where you would gather feedback from the end user with a view to the next PI planning and the cycle would begin again. By time limiting the sprint to say the first two weeks, it enables us to utilise the concept of failing small and early and the regular reviews and feedback enable us to pivot where plans fall through, or progress has slowed.

An example of failing small and early is during the onboarding of a new graduate is when we were also in the process of migration to a new reporting environment. The plan was to onboard the new starter onto the new environment but it became clear that the new environment did not have an clear training plan for those new to industry and the learning curve would be too high, so during a review we decided to first utilise the legacy environment to enable formal training to take place and then migrating the new starter to the new environment by being agile and making this decision quickly. By doing this we were able to minimise the lost time and onboard in the most efficient manner available to us.

By using an iterative approach, we can work with the new starters in a more collaborative way enabling them to own their onboarding and development with guidance from their line manager.

STAND UP

By far the greatest accelerator for onboarding is regular contact time with your line manager or onboarding lead by utilising stand ups which are short ten-to-fifteen-minute meetings which cover three questions from the new starter: What did I do yesterday? What will I do today? What is blocking me from achieving what was planned?

I would recommend these standups continue for the first four to six weeks which should cover at least three iterations of the onboarding process. At that point the new starter should be heavily involved in project work and the contact frequency can slowly reduce. Note this should be led by the new starter and the line manager as part of the review and feedback parts of the agile cycle.

For new starters, regular contact time with their onboarding point of contact or line manager is crucial to setting up the onboarding process with daily or every other day short stand ups. With the line manager acting as the “unblocker”, ensuring the onboarding proceeds at pace. Examples of this could be signposting to the correct guidance document or subject matter expert.

CONCLUSION AND IMPACT

While a one size fits all onboarding often makes sense from an organisational standpoint, when it comes to supporting line managers it often lets down those who are new to industry. The above behaviours do not remove the need to complete eLearning's and read SOP's but recognises those with little industry experience gain little value without the context of contributing to projects and reporting.

DRAWBACKS/ISSUES

When planning for a project led onboarding using the Agile methodology you need to recognise no two onboardings will be the same as projects will have differing needs. This can be a challenge for line managers who want clear instructions rather than a people focused method.

Another consideration is that it will require a higher level of investment of the line managers time and energy due to the increased contact time and Agile planning approach. So, consideration should be given to who is the best or most appropriate individual to onboard new to industry starters, to ensure they are not over committed and have the time to make the investment into the new starter.

BENEFITS

Employing these approaches, I have received feedback that the onboarding is faster and more focused with a clear plan of what's next and how we can achieve it efficiently. This leads to accelerated development and the new starter is more engaged and takes ownership of their development. As the line manager becomes very involved with the new starter onboarding, I have observed that their working relationship also develops quickly and there is more opportunity to set expectations and signpost to good working behaviours and practices. As we develop skills and become more practiced in methodology for delivering projects it is worth considering how we might use that experience in other areas of our roles.

REFERENCES (HEADER 1)

[1] DRUMOND, C, IS THE AGILE MANIFESTO STILL A THING?, [HTTPS://WWW.ATLASSIAN.COM/AGILE/MANIFESTO](https://www.atlassian.com/agile/manifesto),

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