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Customer Collaboration

If it wasn't for customers, there would be no projects. If no one is asking for anything, there would be no need to make anything. Knowing the wants and desires of the customer is vital for project success. But, how much involvement should the customer actually have? Some customers want to be very involved, while others prefer a hands-off approach. Answering that question will give a good indication as to whether you ought to use Agile or Traditional Project Management for the project. As we continue our journey comparing the differences between Agile and Traditional Project Management, we will now examine how the customer fits into the equation.

First, let's look at the how the customer fits into the traditional project. There are many things that cause a project to be created, such as market demand, social needs, legal requirements, and customer requests. When developing the project management plan, the team should make sure that it reflects the priorities and needs of the customer. This should be done through a detailed interview to gather requirements. Once the project begins, however, the customer takes a back seat. They have a few roles while the project is in progress, i.e. helping to identify risks, but for the most part, the project team is in control until the project is complete. Even a requested change by the customer cannot be done easily. The request must go through the proper channels of the Change Control Board.

Oftentimes, the customer doesn't see any aspect of the project until it is finished. The project team will use quality audits to correct any deficiencies and reduce costs of quality in order to increase customer acceptance of the project's product.

On the other hand, the customer is more involved in an Agile project. One of the four principles of the Agile Manifesto states the value of "customer collaboration over contract negotiation". In 2005, cofounders of the Agile Project Network, now known as the Agile Leadership Network, created a Declaration of Interdependence. One section of this Declaration states that they seek to "deliver reliable results by engaging customers in frequent interaction and shared ownership".

When using Agile, the team's highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery. Most project teams will use incremental delivery to achieve this. They will break the project into iterations. Each iteration will deliver part of the required functionality with the highest priority requirements being included in early increments. This allows the Agile team to get quick feedback and acceptance from the customer regularly throughout the project.

***Every company's greatest assets
are its customers, because without
customers there is no company.***

Michael Leboeuf

Business author & Management professor

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The Agile methodology revolves around adaptive planning. Adaptive planning is the idea there is no fixed plan for the entire project. The plan will evolve iteration by iteration and is connected to the value it brings to the customer. This is important to the customer because his needs change during a long project and he gains clearer understanding of his own needs as the project evolves.

User stories are also foundational in Agile. A user story is all the details of the product feature or functionality desired by the customer. They are created by the customer, and then the customer will prioritize the stories according to his or her own value. User stories are documented on index cards to allow the customer to consistently re-plan or reprioritize the features of the project.

While customer collaboration gives the customer more involvement in the project, it also increases the risks. Before the project begins, the contract should include how risks and rewards, incentives and penalties are divided between provider and customer. The customer takes the responsibility for

the risk associated with change management. For example, the cost of the iteration might increase, the cost and value might be out of balance, and the customer might not be able to receive all of the features or functionality desired.

The customer, whether internal or external, gives us the purpose for each and every project. Before the project begins, determine the involvement your customer will have in order to satisfy all expectations.

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THE MATHIS GROUP, INC
DR. KEITH MATHIS

**106 Lakeview Woods
Eureka, MO 63025
800-224-3731**

636/938-5292 voice/fax

wanda@themathisgroup.com

keith@themathisgroup.com

www.themathisgroup.com

www.pmexpertlive.com

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