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Paper versus Electronic Dashboards: Goals and Values

ARTICLE

By Steve Berczuk | March 4, 2012

SUMMARY

It's almost a matter of dogma that, for agile teams, low tech project tracking tools and artifacts are superior to electronic ones. The usual reason you might hear for preferring a physical task board to an electronic issue system are are that a physical task board is more visible and encourages communication and collaboration. I appreciate this, and have seen it, but I've also seen teams do well with issue tracking systems. From time to time I see a discussion of this "physical versus electronic tracking" issue and I find myself frustrated by it, but not sure why.

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Reading Scott Kirshner's article "Incubating ideas from the rank-and-file" in the March 4, 2012 Boston Globe led me to think more about this. The article is about the value of listening to people in your organization when seeking ways to work better. This in itself seems aligned with agile values. In particular, this quote caught my eye:

Many of the ideas presented were dazzling. And almost every one sprang from frustrating experiences. Why, in the 21st century, was the hospital still manually updating whiteboards with information about patients' health status and the teams taking care of them, Lynn Darrah wondered. So she developed a digital display that was just as easy to update, but the information was visible on any computer in the hospital.

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problem is that the "paper v electronic" discussion focuses on the wrong thing. The issue for agile teams is not about paper versus electronic, it's about collaboration, visibility, improvement, and results.

I do believe that, when you are trying to change a culture, introducing a radically new approach can be a way to encourage people to think about how they work. And it's certainly true that "we've always done it that way" isn't a reason to continue doing something. But you need to focus on goals and results, not the tools you use. Changing tools should be a result of the tool not helping you to meet your goals.

Yes, I do prefer a physical task board in many cases. And if your team does a sprint review and isn't meeting goals, and communication seems to be an issue, try a physical task board for a sprint or two and compare. But is the if the team has a good sense of where things are during a sprint, communicates frequently, and meets goals, insisting on a physical task board might actually be contrary to the agile value of putting *individuals and interactions over processes and tools*.

Topics: agile,

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| March 6, 2012 - 8:27am EST

I can understand the lure of the take-anywhere agility of electronic boards, but no online tool is flexible enough to match a physical board. Besides, unlike a hospital, most development teams are co-located and do not rove far from this location. Making one-off notes prominent, making progress visible to management or extra-project folks that don't have logins (or at least, time to think and login) is more efficient in my experience.

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Steve Berczuk | March 6, 2012 - 9:32am EST

Thanks for the comment. For the most part I agree that physical boards are more adaptable, but what I really wanted to focus on is that the discussion : Physical v Electronic is often about the wrong thing. All of the issues you mention (logins, note taking) point to core requirements for a tracking system, and they also are solvable. And every team I worked with where we used an issue tracking system, everyone had access to it, and login was simple. And there are issues that physical boards don't address: Teams where you only have a small amount of space and execs don't want project info in view of visitors, people occasionally working off site, the team being co-located but management not always being on site, etc.

In many cases the paper board is the Simplest Thing That Could Possibly Work. But we should not take that for granted in the search for a good solution.

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looks at until it all must be thrown out.
Physical boards are easy to access and hard to block. If people don't take the time to bring up the electronic tool and scour it, they won't see what is happening. Worse yet, if the tool requires a special query language, it will make it even harder for non-techies to use it.

The electronic tools shine when you want to start tracking times, dates, deliverables and keeping metrics.

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Doug Smith | August 29, 2014 - 12:09pm EDT
After years of on line tools I was quite suprised that my team loved the old fashioned index cards, but the BFIR really presents more information and provides a focus point for the scrum that on line tools never could achieve. For the issue tracking we just used a pad that hangs on the wall. What was old is new again I guess.

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Edmund OShaughnessy | December 14, 2014 - 11:56pm EST
Why either one or the other, why not both? Many of my teams maintain a large physical board to stimulate conversation and promote transparency, and use TFS for the administration of the work items. Sounds like double handling but it really isn't such a big deal (you're working with small user stories and limiting your WIP, aren't you?). And besides, I hate the way an electronic screen in a standup turns into a goggle-box, with people staring at it instead of looking each other in the eye and interacting!

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