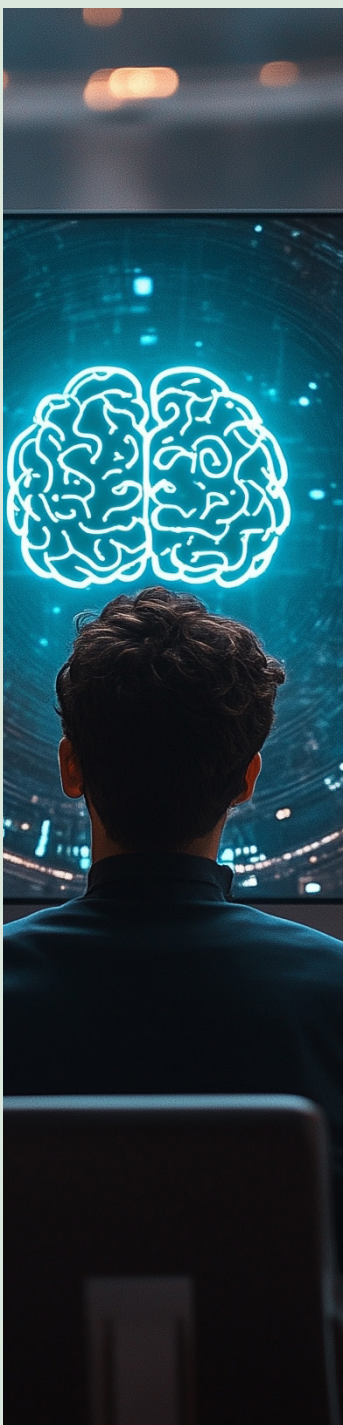




HUMAN-CENTERED AGILE IN THE AGE OF AI

A PRACTICAL PLAYBOOK TO ACCELERATE OUTCOMES

Introduction

What does the Classic poem “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud” on Daffodils by William Wordsworth and “The Banyan Tree” by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore have in common? Of course, these are beautiful, timeless testaments that personify nature as a living entity with wisdom and strength, exhibiting human traits. This exemplifies the first dimension – one that of human creativity and imagination, that uniquely set us apart in the living world. The ability of humans to visualize human traits in inanimate objects has helped to drive empathy and better understand abstract concepts. With the advent of the 21st century, the second dimension, i.e., the cognitive ability of humans, has driven innovations in automation, robotics and eventually the objectification of human intelligence using self-learning agents or machines.

The Agile mindset is a fine blend of both creative and cognitive capabilities of humans. With AI changing the way software is built with generative capabilities achieving “more in less,” business value requires a human-centered governance, driven by clarity of purpose, psychological safety, and collaboration. Surely, AI has reduced human intervention encompassing generations of technologies, providing solution design, and offering architectural

impetus by taking apt decisions. This drives the need for humans to accelerate their creative mindset in setting up an adaptive agile mindset. Given that the human aspect is the heartbeat of Agile Transformation, illustrated are our thoughts on how agile methodology can help us to drive efficient ways of working in the AI age.

Agentic AI also inherently learns the biases and such outliers can impact the results. This needs a robust and dynamic governance mechanism with a responsible, agile AI engine to maneuver effectively through the maze of opportunities and challenges. This paper presents a practical approach to unifying multivendor, multi-culture teams, making work visible through ALM, and using AI as an enabler. This should help Agile teams reduce cycle time, improve quality, and most importantly accelerate outcomes with clear guardrails and measurable ROI.

This thought paper is a humble attempt to amalgamate the perspectives, thoughts, and experiences of an agile practitioner with that of an engineering mindset. These ideas and recommendations are intended to offer value-added services enabling the agile framework to be more productive and drive higher value to the business organization.



Shift in Paradigm

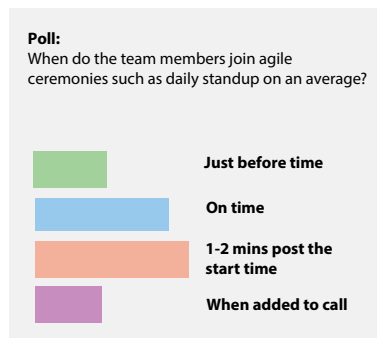
When agile methodologies in different flavors are adopted, at the heart of it is the manifesto and the twelve principles on which it is based. According to the 17th-Annual-State-Of-Agile-Report, Scrum® is the most popular methodology with 63% adoption. It is based on five core values – Focus, Openness, Respect, Courage, and Commitment. The Agile mindset shift is about changing how people think, lead, and work, not just following a framework. The shift in focus from output to outcome-based models again required people to unlearn and re-learn the execution approach. AI in all its evolving manifestations have engulfed us with a multitude of solutions - be it document or meeting summarization, customized search results or proactive issue logging.

AI has seamlessly positioned itself as a virtual, fellow agile-team member in relatively quick time, helping the team discover and continuously improve. As a buddy in the team, AI eases and automates mundane routine tasks, enhances predictability, and accelerates outcomes. This widespread acceptance and adoption of AI again have necessitated the rewiring of the human thought process. An innovative mindset and dynamism have helped humans to be at the helm of the living world.

Coaching Future Ready Teams

Scrum® is inspired by the Rugby formation – an organized team built on collaboration and shared responsibilities to achieve the goal. When do fans connect to watch a LIVE game of their favorite team? More often, they follow the build-up discussions long before the game kicks-off. Likewise, how often does the team connect before-time or prepare prior to a team huddle? Considering scrum ceremonies as a launchpad into the daily routine, is key to driving meaningful outcomes. The survey is a simple health-check of the intent and appreciating this dimension.

While curiosity, interest, and enthusiasm drive people to participate, perform and deliver, it is a measure of how much one connects to the work. While many of the agile ceremonies successfully capture updates, feedback and status, it is important to feed forward as well - The team needs to be well-informed on organizational decisions with regular leadership-connect and the roadmap for the year ahead so that it is aligned to the purpose and mission. This helps make an agile team agreement acceptable and understood by all.



Agentic AI can leverage the collaboration channels for personalized mindset check prompt following up with personalized morale boosting messages, log attendance for meetings, present feedback forms towards the end of planned meetings. These can be leveraged as aggregated inputs for retrospectives and employee participation. Automation analytics can highlight patterns for the scrum master to improvise and actionize.

Meaningful Engagement

When the team “Like what they do”, the productivity naturally leaps as much as when they “Do what they like”. When does this happen?

- The team feels valued when their perspectives are sought and included for decisions that impact them.
- Agile practitioners can steer time-boxing various activities, closing calls within planned slots, thereby encouraging discipline and focus.
- A conducive environment that allows the team to continuously learn and remain updated.
- It is important to keep the team informed of the decisions that have impact on them.
- Traditionally, seniority in the team or work experience is sometimes considered as a criterion for work assignment, research activities or inclusion in key discussions. The paradigm of valuing higher expertise in the skill is the need for sustainable scrum teams.

Geographical, cultural, and intellectual inclusivity coupled with the opportunity for learning and roadmap for growth, results in an impactful and inclusive team engagement, enhancing outcomes in an agile framework.

Lean Agile

Scrum® aligns with the five principles of Lean®. While Agile recommends minimal documentation and just enough process, how does a bulky recording contributing to higher carbon footprint justify the lean practices? High collaboration time, multiple follow-ups, higher defects also tend to weigh down on the lean processes.

Recorded Artefacts

Today, recordings are the norm where repetition is avoided. But it is cumbersome to wade through a maze of topics in a recording for a quick query where a call or IM will be easier.

- Akin to AI and automation performing repetitive work, recordings have gained momentum for online courses and training. It compromises on real-time collaboration though.
- It is a safety net for multi-tasking during meetings, providing an opportunity for not being interactive and virtual absenteeism.
- It may also inhibit free-flow of thoughts where participants are conscious of being on-record.

Poll:

How often have you revisited a missed discussion by accessing the recording?

- Never
- **Less than 40%**
- 40-70%
- Always

Lean AI Mantra

- An AI agent can download recordings into the project space prior to the stamped expiry date with appropriate access controls and notify the attendees.
- Where necessary to record, keep it brief and contextual. Leverage AI to summarize.
- Proactive prompts by AI bots to remind attendees of an upcoming meeting, nudging on confirming acceptance, help replan the discussion if declined by key participants.
- Recorded calls do not mean deemed participation. AI based navigable contextual search, or transcription quickly help the team to connect the dots.

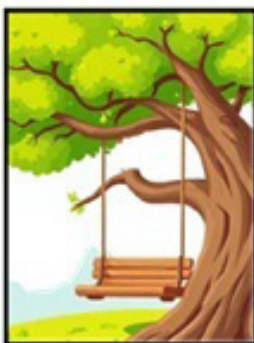
Bridging Business and IT

One of the organizational success-factors is how business and IT work hand in hand to achieve the goals. The Product owner (PO) is key to delivering business value. It is one of the underrated roles in Agile teams which can make or break a team. Their availability and involvement are crucial to the success of the Scrum team.

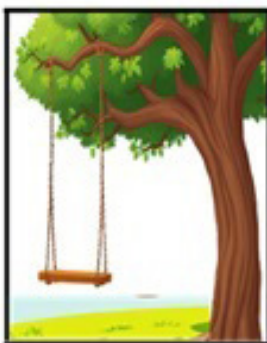
The Lean Misnomer

The idea of lean processes has been an excuse in some organizations to limit the number of participants in demos to business. It may then serve only to tick the checkbox, by including only developers or testers to demonstrate the application built. It is important to have wider participation in demos including scrum masters, designers, and architects so that the 360-degree view of the application is presented and any query on framework, domain and business scenarios are addressed correctly, completely and in real-time.

Agile practices largely tend to be limited to technical teams. As per 17th-Annual-State-Of-Agile-Report, only 32% of the business leaders and executives are actively participating in agile transformations. A product owner is key for establishing meaningful collaboration between business and IT to uphold customer centricity and to realize business value.



How customer explained it



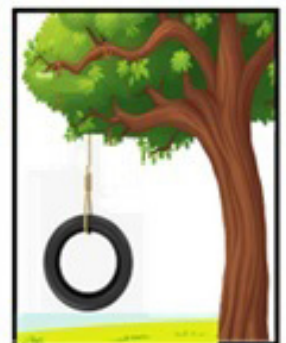
As understood by architect



As built by the developer



As verified by the tester



Expectation from the customer

The first dimension is in planning, prioritizing, and building a healthy backlog, breaking down the big rocks of requirements to realize the business requirements and untangling the dependencies, collaborating with product owners. Another dimension is the PO being the torch bearer and navigator steering the Scrum® team. The IT team looks up to the PO as the window for business asks, roadmap and in turn supports in validating the feasibility early through proof of concepts (PoC). When the second dimension is overlooked, for instance, absence of regular team-connect by PO, then gaps arise in the understanding of the requirements, impacting quality leading to rework, stretched working and an unhappy team. These are typical of the 'Tree-swing' scenario.

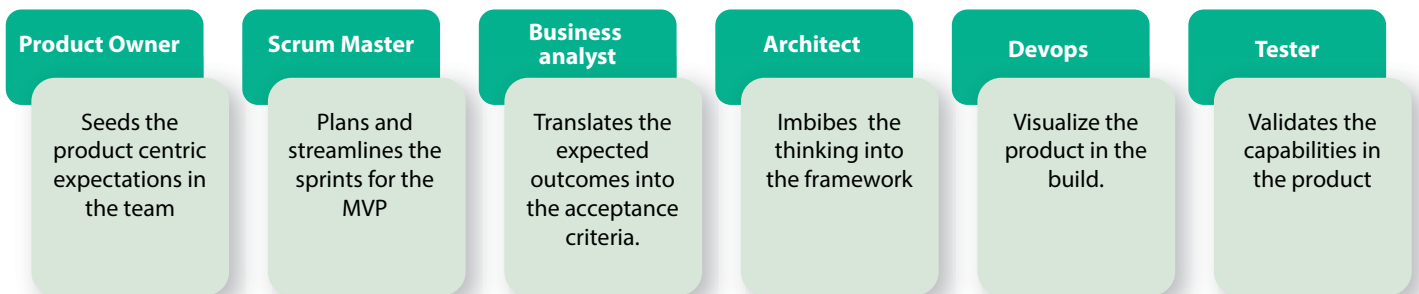
Product owners can be empowered using AI-enabled, automated dashboards:

- Capture anonymous feedback for the PO from the team to plug any gaps in the team's know-how of TO-BE features and the roadmap.
- Traceability indicator from requirements to the acceptance criteria in the stories.
- Formulate MVPs from the requirement scope based on priority, dependency, and urgency.

Product-Centric Thinking

"We didn't do anything wrong, but somehow, we lost," former Nokia® CEO Stephen Elop conceded in his final speech announcing the sale of Nokia's mobile phone division to Microsoft® in 2013. Classic Project management has a triad in focus – An agreed "scope" to be delivered in an agreed "time" and "budget." The inherent assumption in this model is that a stable product will stand the test of time. But this is hardly true. Market demand is continuously evolving. Execution and delivery excellence without alignment to the market is a doomsday scenario. The once executive blackberry also lost its sheen.

Product centricity keeps customers at the core. The focus is on changing customer needs and priorities using the levers of the triad, working in small iterations to deliver the business value or the outcome. A small MVP (Minimal Viable Product) is delivered to market and seeks feedback is sought from users of the system. The scope is fine-tuned at real-time, delivering iterative production ready outcomes.



Mindful Orchestration

When the scrum master is unavailable, many of the teams are self-organized in scrum ceremonies. Based on the sprint dashboard, updates are provided, and a scribe adds it to the meeting minutes. There is much more to the role of a scrum master and in some teams, agile coaches. While facilitating sprint ceremonies are the front-ending activities, these are akin to the user-interface or a presentation layer in an application. The core orchestration engine at the backend is the actual backbone that determines the cohesiveness and success of any team. The Agile framework indicates their role in coaching on values and principles.

Human-centric governance based on mindfulness and dynamism in execution is an important dimension. There is no single approach that fits all teams. The scrum master facilitates creation of the team charter based on the experience based on what enables the team to perform to its best potential.

● Happiness-quotient

At the start of daily scrum calls and retrospective calls, polls can prompt the team members on wellness questions. AI can be a wellness buddy analyzing any signs of emotional outbursts and burnout, keeping the scrum master notified. Solution prompts or quick creative online activities can help overcome the distracted mind without impacting productivity. Building collaboration in a team and icebreaking sessions for new members help in creating a positive team culture.

● Psychological Wellness

Many a time, the requirements for niche skills drive the clients to opt for cross-functional teams comprising members from multiple organizations. In such a scenario, the developers and other Agile roles in the team could be a mix of client and multiple partner organizations. The team could be a mix of members from different geographies, gender, generation etc. Regular team-building activities encourage cross-cultural sensitivity, enhance bonding among members, and avoid stereotyping. Colocation of team once a quarter for ceremonies like PI planning and regular video calls boosts camaraderie.

● Embracing Change

Organizational restructuring, innovations and changing skill expectations often result in shuffling of teams abruptly. This causes temporary imbalance even in a well-set, organized team. The team, comfortable with familiar processes, may be resistant to change and newer ways of working. The emotions of the team may range from self-

doubting on capabilities to loss of confidence and enthusiasm leading to increased dissatisfaction and eventually attrition. This is where the scrum master and coach need to apply mind over matter to enable the team to perceive change positively and effectively prepare the team for the transition. Many teams continue to be connected in professional groups and lend a helping hand in diverse ways.

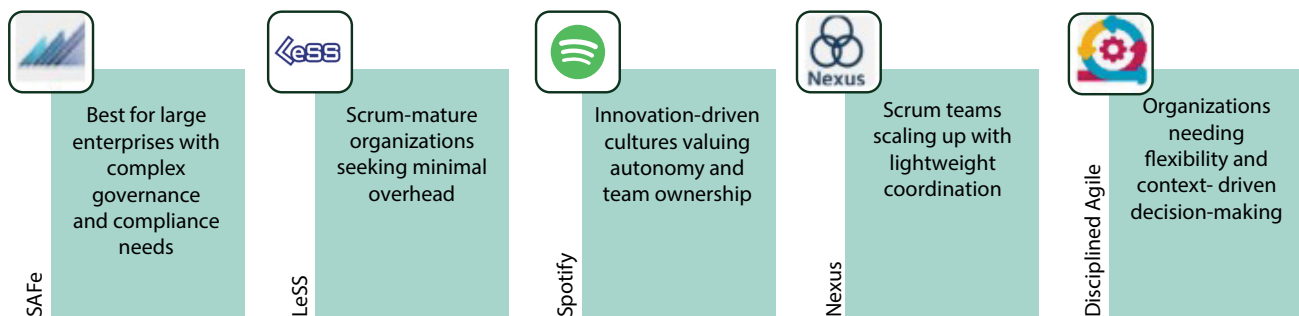
Scrum masters are the best mentors to drive a responsible Agile mindset in the team. In the fast paced, innovation led workplace today, the right attitude is valued at par, if not more than skill. Scrum teams that inculcate and mould a strong team culture in individuals in their formative years result in leaders who foster and influence highly effective teams in future.

Few AI enablers for adoptions in this space:

- AI can help gamify and provide score/insights on hygiene factors. AI could provide insights on story point sizing accuracy and consistency based on comparable stories, learning from the past trends.
- AI could help detect anti-Agile patterns when it arises and prompt Scrum Masters. Scrum Masters could use this nudge to coach and rewire the practices.

Strategic comparison of leading Agile scaling models

Below are the industry standard guidelines highlighting key dimensions and widely accepted drivers across industries when choosing a suitable scaling framework.



On a scale from 1 to 6, with six being the highest, the scores for key dimensions across the agile methodologies are presented below.



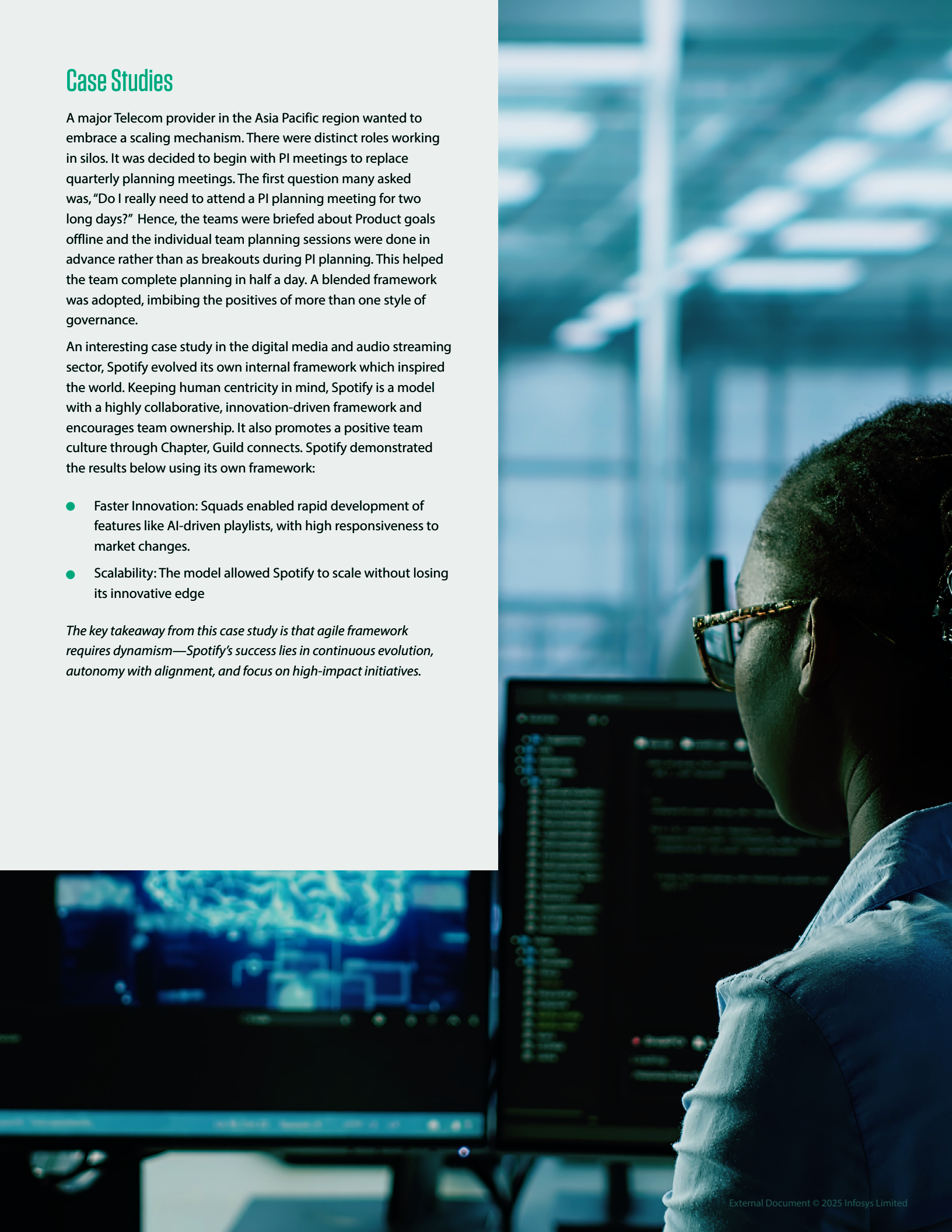
Case Studies

A major Telecom provider in the Asia Pacific region wanted to embrace a scaling mechanism. There were distinct roles working in silos. It was decided to begin with PI meetings to replace quarterly planning meetings. The first question many asked was, “Do I really need to attend a PI planning meeting for two long days?” Hence, the teams were briefed about Product goals offline and the individual team planning sessions were done in advance rather than as breakouts during PI planning. This helped the team complete planning in half a day. A blended framework was adopted, imbibing the positives of more than one style of governance.

An interesting case study in the digital media and audio streaming sector, Spotify evolved its own internal framework which inspired the world. Keeping human centricity in mind, Spotify is a model with a highly collaborative, innovation-driven framework and encourages team ownership. It also promotes a positive team culture through Chapter, Guild connects. Spotify demonstrated the results below using its own framework:

- **Faster Innovation:** Squads enabled rapid development of features like AI-driven playlists, with high responsiveness to market changes.
- **Scalability:** The model allowed Spotify to scale without losing its innovative edge

The key takeaway from this case study is that agile framework requires dynamism—Spotify's success lies in continuous evolution, autonomy with alignment, and focus on high-impact initiatives.



Recommendations and Way Forward

As the adage goes, 'You can only take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink.' The processes, frameworks, recommendations and guidelines have evolved with time, are proven and adopted in the industry and global landscape. However, what works best for each team and project may not work well for another similar task. The social, cultural, and generational aspects bring a humane element to execution and delivery.

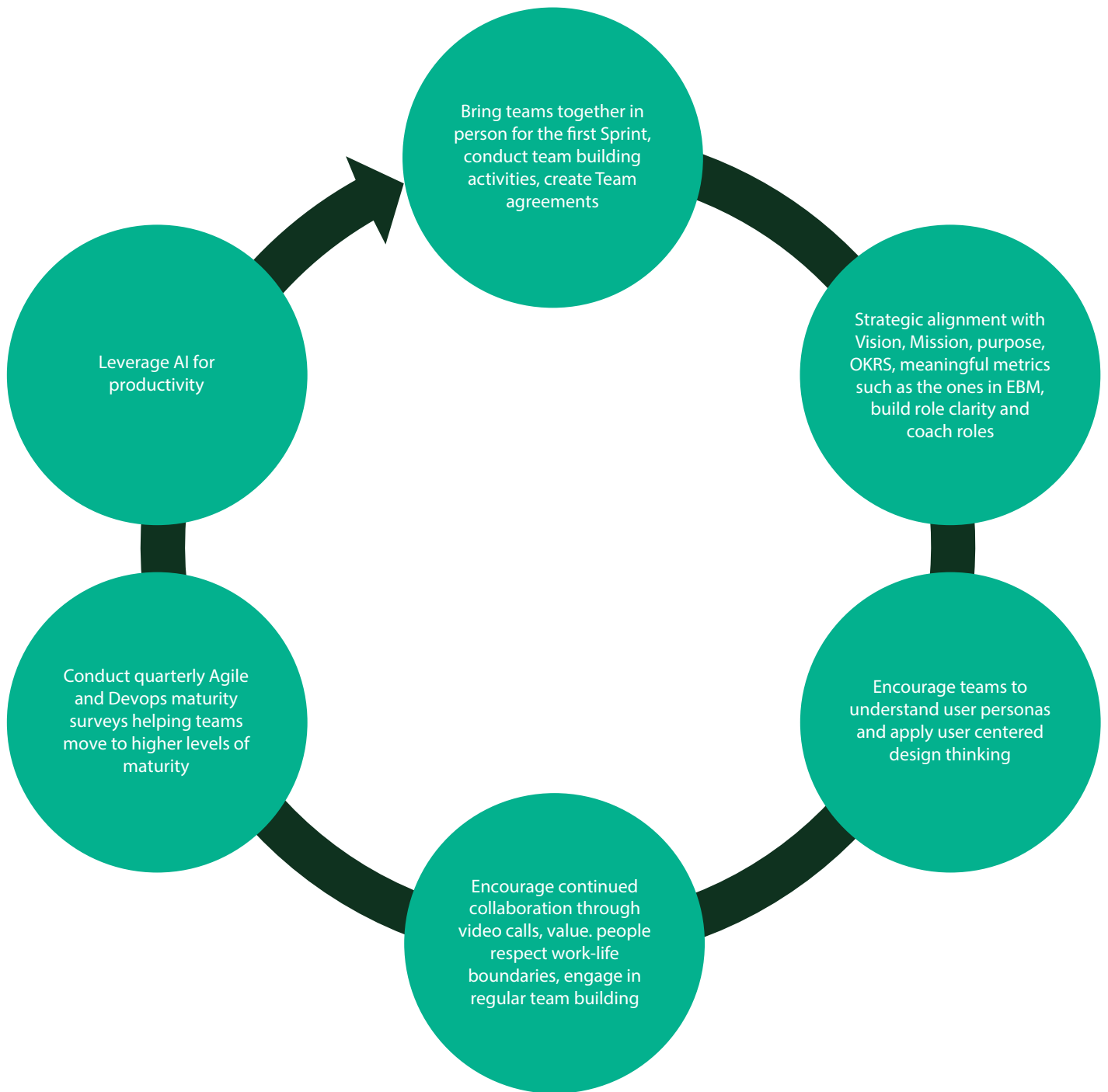
'We'll cross the bridge when we come to it' – This approach of being unprepared and just-in-time decision making, does not work well even in today's AI world. As generative AI evolves its learning models with respect to apt decision making in uncertainties and regulating biases, it requires human reinforcement to ensure mindful solutioning. Proactive planning with data, research, and best practices enriched with our prior experience, enable us to collaborate and take the team along in the best possible manner, as we cross the bridge to achieve outcomes with excellence and acceptance.

A human-centric approach encompasses both customer centricity and team engagement. A positive team culture raises enthusiasm and motivation which in turn enhances their commitment to go the extra mile with improved productivity. This forms a solid foundation for the customer-centric dimension. A balance between both the dimensions achieves a mutually beneficial ecosystem for the team to flourish with creativity and to rewire seamlessly during waves of transformations and disruptions.

From a framework perspective, to deliver real value, the focus needs to shift from output to outcomes that matter to customers. Evidence Based Management (EBM) is a framework by Scrum.org which helps translate strategic goals into actionable metrics. For instance, a software organization faced stagnation in revenue growth and lacked clarity on how team efforts aligned with business outcomes. They embraced EBM, introduced the four Key Value Areas (KVAs) Current Value, Unrealized Value, Time to Market, and Ability to Innovate. Teams began tracking metrics like Net Promoter Score, Cycle Time, and Market Opportunity. Sprint Goals were explicitly linked to Product Goals and the company's long-term vision, hence achieving strategic alignment.



The Best Practices:



Conclusion

The intent of this paper is to make scrum team future ready, enable longer employee retention through better team engagement. Better employee satisfaction leads to positive experiences and enhances business outcomes. Reducing dependencies on people through rotation of team members across agile teams gives individuals an opportunity to work in their aspirational area and offers a wider exposure. The human-centric approach brings responsible agile and AI governance on a common platform to drive value and engineering efficacies.

Today, AI is a virtual, versatile team member, an enabler helping team discover themselves and continuously improve. The AI buddy in the team supports by doing routine mundane tasks, helping developers to focus on important things such as understanding users, improving outcomes, and working efficiently and effectively so that they can achieve the desired client outcomes as well as have a contented career and work life balance.



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