

Position Paper for the OOPSLA 2003 Workshop

“The Customer Role in Agile Projects”

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The agile projects I'm consulting fall into two different categories: Internal projects an IT department does for an operative department of the same group and fire brigade projects where the goal is less to run a cool project but to limit the loss and finally end up with at least something useful. Both categories have one thing in common: Money does not really matter. Though this may partly be due to the fact that hiring an external consultant is not really in tune with the current German business strategy „cut costs, no matter how much it costs“, I think it is also an indication of the current perception of traditional methodologies among the clients: Supported by their legal consultants and academic theorists, most managers still think that the approach of traditional „engineering“ methodologies gives them security. You order what you have specified and the vendor delivers „one piece of software, carriage paid“. Of course, there is enough sense of reality to see that most vendors miss this target, but most professionals still think that this is only, because of sloppy work, lack of skills, or malevolence - all of which are preventable by putting enough pressure on the vendor. And if the vendor still fails, it's their fault and we can sue them. In internal projects and projects where the roof is on fire already, it is quite obvious that this preposition doesn't work anymore. All the pressure hasn't helped and eventually most managers realize that applying Jerry Weinberg's first law of bad management („If something doesn't work, use more of it“) finally leads to a situation where the client will go down anyhow and the only choice is whether the vendor has to follow or not.

Running a successful agile project needs a completely different mindset on the client side (as well as on the vendor site, of course). An attitude where money spent is not the major issue, but a good return on investment is crucial for success, a play-to-win attitude instead of a play-not-to-loose attitude.

If we don't want to be restricted to emergency responses we need to help potential clients to change their attitude towards software development. This needs to rebuild the trust our profession as generously destroyed over the last three decades. We need to prove, that it's feasible to build software that provides a good return on investment, if the financial controlling restrains from micro-management. We need to increase the understanding that developing software is a development task with all implied uncertainty, and pressure is not a way to deal with uncertainty, and we need to spread the idea that professionalism is not measured in pdps (pages of documentation per second) produced in a project. We need to develop factual and legal cooperation models beyond „Customer on site“ that cover the needs of our clients for security without smothering any change.

The agile community did a good job in conveying these ideas to programmers and designers, sometimes even in conveying them to development managers. Now it's time to address the client management. In many cases our solution fits to their problems but that's not sufficient, as long as the clients still perceive these solutions as additional risks - if they perceive them at all.