Agile thinking saves NTT Ltd.'s
program increment planning process

Why NTT Ltd. needed to take its planning virtual

When the WHO declared COVD-19 a global health emergency the service offer development team at NTT Ltd. realized that they would not be able to host their regular program increment planning (PI Planning) session at a single location. A virtual solution was required.

How agile thinking saved the service offer development cycle

With only a few weeks to go before their event they shifted from a centrally hosted event to a virtual event, using Microsoft Teams to link up the 30+ teams in four hubs as well as from other remote locations. They also revised the schedule to ensure that they could accomplish everything they needed in this new environment.

What the future of planning looks like

The qualified success of the initial virtual PI Planning session showed the company that completely centralized planning sessions could be a thing of the past. While there are still a number of challenges that need to be overcome, the future of service offer development will certainly be more virtual than in the past, and built around a series of regional hubs, giving them the best of both worlds.

'Our ability to switch a key planning session involving 400 people from a centralized event to a virtual event in just a couple of weeks highlights the agility of our people.'

John Andrews, Senior Vice President, Services Design & Development, NTT Ltd.

NTT

Challenge

Why NTT Ltd. needed to take its planning virtual

In 2017, NTT Ltd. fundamentally shifted the way they ran planning for new service offer developments. Moving away from a waterfall development process they embraced the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) combining the best attributes of Agile development, Lean manufacturing techniques, and Systems thinking methodology. Crucial to making the new process work was getting all the people involved in service offer development together at the start of each 12-week cycle to plan the details of how they intended to deliver against the objectives that had been set.

For the first two years, the 400-strong team gathered in Johannesburg for up to 10 days, of which the final two days were dedicated to an event called Program Increment Planning (PI Planning). This entailed flying team members in from around the world and then, through a highly structured planning process, committing to delivering the the agreed-on service offers and capabilities by the end of the 12-week cycle. These sessions would include all the relevant stakeholders including people from marketing, commercial, service delivery, engineering, IT, sales and go-to-market. This was successful because it ensured that anyone who needed to be consulted was available and decisions could be made quickly with all the relevant information on hand.

This has proved remarkably efficient and reshaped service offer development in the organization, enabling it to respond quickly to any changes in the market or feedback from clients.

The first PI Planning session of 2020 was scheduled to take place on 25 and 26 February but as the time drew near the organizers realized that the spread of COVID-19 was going to cause issues.

Solution

How agile thinking saved the service offer development cycle

The team realized, at the end of January, that there was no way they would put team members in danger by asking them to travel internationally in the middle of what was already classed as a Global Health Emergency by the World Health Organization.

This posed a problem, as it was essential that the planning session go ahead as it was critical to the organization. At this point the decision was made to switch the event from being exclusively physical to a virtual event.

After discussions with the teams it was decided to use Microsoft Teams as the platform to host the event, but there were still a number of decisions to be made.

With travel within regions still possible, they made the call to bring specific team members together into regional hubs, including London, Bangalore and Sydney, with the South African members still gathering at the original location.

Even then there were still challenges to be faced.

Not only did they have to find ways for teams that were usually in the same room to work together, but the entire structure of the two days would have to be revised to accommodate the new reality. After the schedule was revised to include an additional day to accommodate all global timezones, the event went ahead as scheduled.

Outcome

What the future of planning looks like

The qualified success of the initial event has led the team to conclude that it will be unlikely that they will ever host a purely physical event as they had in the past.

They are already planning for the next event, which happens at the end of June, and with the subsequent escalation in the spread of the pandemic, this event will need to be run entirely remotely with all attendees joining from their own homes. They expect that this will create additional challenges, as the capacity for people to effectively interact with each other will be even more limited.

That said they do expect that future events will operate using the hub model that was used for the first virtual event.

There are still a number of challenges that need to be addressed, not least of which is the issue of time zones.

The service offer development team also has to work with the Information & Technology team to ensure that the IT infrastructure is ready to support any product changes they decide on.

The physical distance between the parts of the team also makes troubleshooting difficult. When the planning was hosted at a central point it was possible for the coordinators to move from room to room looking for issues that need to be addressed and then pulling the relevant parties aside to thrash out a solution.

The changes forced on this process by the COVID-19 pandemic have changed the way NTT Ltd. does planning forever, but as with service offer planning, the PI Planning event itself will also be evolved in an incremental 'agile' fashion, continuing to deliver value to the company, and continuing to optimise return on all investments and delight our clients.

Which Technologies?
• Microsoft Teams

Which Partners?
• Microsoft