

The agile mindset: a project management workbook

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Introducing the agile mindset



Agile as an attitude

Agile is a mindset and a methodology. It originated within software development and has become a benchmark for iterative project management across all industries.

Businesses of all kinds can benefit from an agile approach, particularly during challenging times that demand fluidity and innovation.

The idea of "pivoting your business", which has become a buzzword during COVID-19, is a great example of agile in action.

In this handbook we demonstrate why taking learnings from software development can help you solve complex business problems and adapt to change.

Why agile is so effective

Agile works so well because it provides enough structure to drive fast and decisive action, while also enabling a fluid and nuanced approach.

Structure: At times where there is a lack of certainty, such as during a pandemic, agile can provide much-needed normalcy and structure. The agile approach provides a regular and repeatable framework for trial and error, while also helping overcome potential roadblocks.

Flexibility: agile is especially well-suited to enabling teams to find a way forward when priorities are changing daily and taking a fluid approach is necessary for survival. It allows for more in-course corrections, because work has been planned in smaller portions and over shorter time periods.

Empowerment: With agile, teams and their members are empowered to make decisions in the moment, rather than having to ask for permission or wait for a manager's signoff. This helps businesses react with speed and responsiveness to changing customer needs and government guidelines during COVID-19.

An agile mindset is an attitude. It encompasses respect, collaboration, improvement, ongoing learning, pride in ownership, delivering value, and the ability to adapt to change.

Examples of agile in action during COVID-19



Archie Rose

This Sydney-based gin distillery and bar pivoted to producing hand sanitiser within a matter of weeks.

www.archierose.com.au



Happy Scrubs

Business owner Kate Hannaford swapped events management for manufacturing scrubs for frontline healthcare workers.

www.thehappyscrubs.com.au



Guerrilla Tacos

This food truck-turned restaurant launched "emergency kits" with supplies to make 60 tacos, plus a roll of toilet paper.

www.guerrillatacos.com



Customer case study: PS Cafe

During the COVID-19 pandemic, PS Cafe has pushed the boundaries of their offering, providing new products based on changing customer demand.

Every morning the PS Cafe team is baking fresh loaves of bread as an optional add-on for orders. Before the pandemic they have never once sold out of bread, but now they are selling out every day.

This is a fantastic example of putting agile thinking into place to create new opportunities during times of challenge.

Tips for putting agile into practice

1. Use timeboxing

A key part of agile is that it doesn't allow deadlines to drift. A typical agile cycle (also referred to as a "sprint") might be only two weeks long, so rather than being task-oriented ("how long will it take me to finish all these tasks?") it is time-oriented ("which of these tasks can I complete within two weeks?").

2. Plan collaboratively

Agile is not a command-and-control methodology. You're not going to be able to get buy-in from your staff by simply demanding they get through their tasks within the next few weeks. The planning phase is a collaborative one where you work together to set realistic goals for the next cycle.

3. Use a "board"

Agile management has popularised the use of boards for representing the status of tasks. This is a very simple concept where tasks are represented as annotated squares and columns from left to right represent a task status (e.g. "To do", "In progress", "In review", "Done").

Tasks are assigned to individual people and are moved from one status to another (this is often done as part of a daily five minute meeting). It's a great way of viewing the progress of your agile sprint in a single glance (more tasks on the right of the board is good, more tasks on the left is bad!), and also detecting bottlenecks if one task just isn't moving.

There are plenty of software packages for this purpose, but don't feel like you have to go digital – using post-it notes on a whiteboard is just as good!

4. Know where to start

Knowing where to start is tricky, and the best thing to do is use your customers as a guide. What are some of their biggest pain points that you can alleviate if you just pivot your business a little? What are some things they'd love that you can provide? See our examples in this document for inspiration.

5. Don't interrupt the sprint

Once you commit to a two week cycle you have to defend that from other items trying to interrupt. It's very tempting to just put one of the planned tasks off so you can take on something else that you forgot about, or having other items distract you from your goal. Try to resist doing so, because you'll be robbing agile of much of its effectiveness.

6. Don't push out the end-date

There are going to be times when it's super tempting to say to yourself "let's just keep this cycle going another week so we can finish up these tasks", but that's very much against the agile way. The key is to identify which tasks you can remove so you can still hit that end date. This is especially important in fast-changing environments like we're all experiencing at the moment – the last thing you want to do is delay.



Common challenges of an agile approach

Achieving buy-in: This is definitely a challenge, especially with team members who aren't used to working in this sort of style. Ensure those people are involved in the collaborative planning so they feel a sense of ownership and have been included in planning their workload.

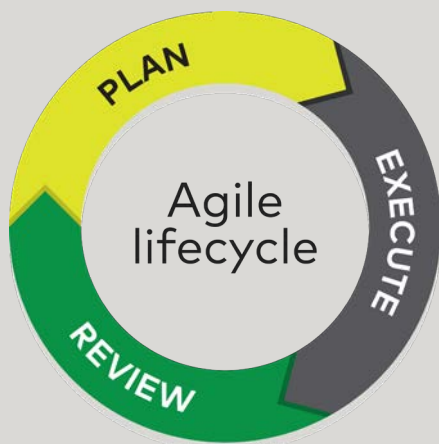
Accountability can be confronting: Ultimately this is a very positive element of agile processes, but some people can find the accountability confronting. With allocated tasks laid out clearly on a board and a short turnaround time there's really nowhere to hide, so you may need to help people with their time management and communication.

Your first iteration probably won't go to plan:

Like anything you haven't tried before it's going to take some practice to get this right. The whole ethos though is iterative improvement, so rather than focussing on trying to get everything perfect from day one, focus on each cycle being better than the one before.

It requires discipline: As already mentioned, you're not going to get the full benefit if you just push out the end dates, or don't spend time collaborating with your team. All parties need to prepare for those planning sessions, and consider blocking out explicit time in everyone's schedule to make sure you're hitting those planning and review sessions right on time.

Project worksheet



If you've been working on a side project to get you through COVID-19, and learning as you go, chances are you've already been taking an agile approach.

By refining your processes and adding an extra layer of structure, agile can help you turn these side projects into viable and essential revenue drivers for your business in the longer term.

This approach can apply equally to internal process improvements (for example, bringing your team back on after being stood down) or adapting your offering to grow your business post-coronavirus.

So, how do we put this into practice?

Step 1: Plan

In this step, the aim is to define the scope of work and get mutual commitment to delivering the desired outcomes. Answering the following questions will help you create your plan.

- a. What problem are you solving for your customers/team?

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- b. What do your customers/team members want?

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c. What works for them right now?

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d. When do you need a solution by? Set a timebox.
This may be dictated by external factors such as
the date lockdown restrictions will lift.

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f. How will your team go about it?

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e. What is the minimum viable product you and
your team achieve within this time frame?

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g. What steps need to be taken?

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Step 2: Execute

In this step you will take action to deliver the planned activities within the timeframes set in step 1.

Step 3: Review

In this step you will collaborate with the original stakeholders from step 1, answering the following questions to help you refine your approach:

a. What worked well?

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b. What didn't work?

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c. What are we not clear on?

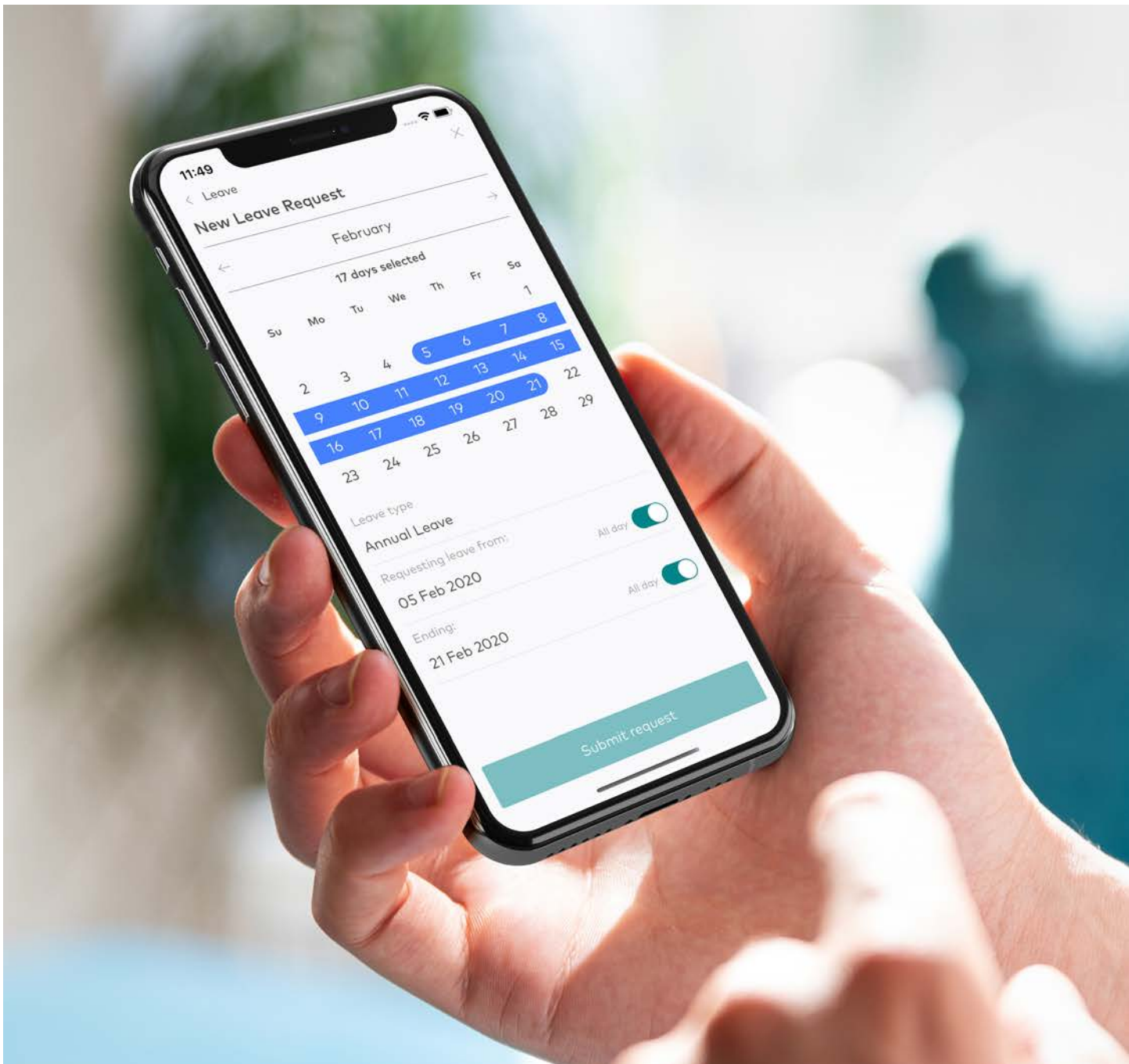
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d. What actions will we work on over the next phase?

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Step 4: Repeat

Return to step 1: Iterative approach rinse/repeat steps 1-3.



Find out more

Want to learn more about how to adopt an agile mindset?

Call us on 1300 833 137
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