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This book is dedicated to two teams; The first team is my family. My wife, Bernice, and my kids, Ashley, Carter, and Emma—without their support and constantly asking “are you done yet?” this book would not be here. They kept me focused and supported me throughout.

The second team is the group of guys from the Falcon project while at Microsoft. John Boal, Donavan Hoepcke, Bart Hsu, Mike Puleio, Mon Leelaphisut, and Michael Corrigan (our boss), thank you for having the courage to leap with me. You guys made this book a reality.
This page intentionally left blank
Chapter 3  Using Team Consultants to Optimize Team Performance  35
  The Story  35
  The Model  39
    Establishing a Team Consultant Pool  40
    Building Your Team  42
  Keys to Success  47
    Accountability  47
    Experiment  48
    Be Cautious of Overloading  49
    Plan for Potential Downtime  49
    Team Consultants Are Not a Replacement for Dedicated Teams  49
  Reference  50
  Works Consulted  50

Chapter 4  Predicting Team Velocity  51
  The Story  51
  The Model  56
    The Problem with Historical Data  56
    Shedding Light on Blind Estimation  58
    Wait and See (Use Real Data)  61
    Truncated Data Collection  64
  Keys to Success  65
  References  67

Chapter 5  Implementing the Scrum Roles  69
  The Story  69
  The Model  73
    Choosing Roles  74
    Mixing Roles  74
    When, Not If, You Decide to Mix Roles Anyway  78
  Keys to Success  78
Chapter 6  Determining Sprint Length 81
  The Story 81
  The Model 84
  Project Duration 85
  Product Owner and Stakeholders 86
  Scrum Team 87
  Determining Your Sprint Length 88
  Be Warned 90
  Beyond the Quiz 91
  Keys to Success 91
  Sprints Longer than One Month 92
  Extending Sprint Length 92
  Reference 92

Chapter 7  How Do You Know You’re Done? 93
  The Story 93
  The Model 95
  Introduction 96
  Brainstorming 96
  Categorization 97
  Sorting and Consolidation 98
  Creation and Publishing 100
  What about “Undone” Work? 101
  Keys to Success 101
  References 102

Chapter 8  The Case for a Full-Time ScrumMaster 103
  The Story 103
  The Model 106
  Keys to Success 112
  Remove Impediments/Resolve Problems 113
  Break Up Fights/Act as Team Mom 113
  Report Team Data 113
  Facilitate and Help Out Where Needed 114
  Educate the Organization and Drive Organizational Change 115
  In Summary 115
  References 116
  Work Consulted 116
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Decomposing Stories and Tasks</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Keeping Defects in Check</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Sustained Engineering and Scrum</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Sprint Review</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16</td>
<td>Retrospectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Story</td>
<td>193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Practice</td>
<td>196</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give Retrospectives Their Due Diligence</td>
<td>196</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan an Effective Retrospective</td>
<td>197</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Run the Retrospective</td>
<td>198</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keys to Success</td>
<td>200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show Them the Why</td>
<td>201</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build a Good Environment</td>
<td>201</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold Them When You Need Them</td>
<td>201</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treat Retrospectives Like the First-Class Citizens They Are</td>
<td>202</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>202</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART III  FIRST AID**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 17</th>
<th>Facilitating a Productive Daily Scrum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Story</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Model</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of Day</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start and End on Time</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expose Hidden Impediments</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End with the Beginning in Mind</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keys to Success</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep the Meeting Cadence</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stand—Don’t Sit</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work as a Team</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Patient</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 18</th>
<th>The Fourth Question in Scrum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Story</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Model</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keys to Success</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PART IV ADVANCED SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES

Chapter 23 Sustainable Pace

The Story 265
The Model 269
  Shorten Iterations 272
  Monitor Burndown Charts 273
  Increase Team Time 274
Keys to Success 274
References 276

Chapter 24 Delivering Working Software

The Story 277
The Model 281
  Core Story 281
  Number of Users 282
  Start with the Highest Risk Element 283
  Expand and Validate 283
Keys to Success 284
  Change in Thinking 285
  Rework 285
  Focus on End-to-End Scenarios 286
Work Consulted 287

Chapter 25 Optimizing and Measuring Value

The Story 289
The Model 292
  Stories 292
  Taxes 292
  Spikes 293
  Technical Debt 294
  Other Potential Categories 295
  Structuring the Data 296
  Using the Data 296
Keys to Success 297
  Educate Stakeholders 298
  Work with Stakeholders 298
  Determine Trends and Patterns 298
Reference 299
Works Consulted 299
## Chapter 26  Up-Front Project Costing 301

- The Story 301
- The Model 306
  - Functional Specifications 306
  - User Stories 306
  - Estimating Stories 307
  - Prioritizing Stories 308
  - Determining Velocity 308
  - Deriving Cost 309
  - Build the Release Plan 309
- Keys to Success 310
- References 311

## Chapter 27  Documentation in Scrum Projects 313

- The Story 313
- The Model 316
  - Why Do We Document? 317
  - What Do We Document? 317
  - When and How Do We Document? 318
  - Documenting in an Agile Project 321
  - Starting Projects without Extensive Documentation 322
- Keys to Success 323
- References 324

## Chapter 28  Outsourcing and Offshoring 325

- The Story 325
- The Model 328
  - Consider the True Costs 328
  - Dealing with Reality 330
- Keys to Success 332
  - Choose the Right Offshore Team 332
  - Allocate the Work in the Least Painful Way 333
  - Stick with the Scrum Framework 333
  - Build a One-Team Culture 334
  - Be Prepared to Travel 335
  - Have a Project/Team Coordinator 336
  - Never Offshore When . . . 336
- References 337
- Work Consulted 337
Chapter 29  Prioritizing and Estimating Large Backlogs—The Big Wall  339
   The Story  339
   The Model  342
       Team  342
       Stakeholders  343
   Keys to Success  346
       Preplanning Is Essential  346
       Focus Discussions and Set Time Limits  347
       Use a Parking Lot for Unresolvable Disagreements  347
       Bring Extra Cards/Paper for Stories Created in the Room  348
       The Big Wall with Remote/Distributed Teams  348
       Remind Everyone That Things Will Change  348
   References  348

Chapter 30  Writing Contracts  349
   The Story  349
   The Model  353
       Traditional Contracts and Change Orders  353
       Timing  356
       Ranges and Changes  358
   Keys to Success  361
       Customer Availability  361
       Acceptance Window  362
       Prioritization  362
       Termination Clauses  363
       Trust  363
   References  363

PART V  WILDERNESS ESSENTIALS  365

Chapter 31  Driving to Done through Collaboration  367
   The Story  367
   The Model  371
       Task Poker  371
       Pair Programming  373
       Limit Open Work Items  373
       Two-Week Sprints  377
       Creating Visibility with a Task Board  378
   Keys to Success  380
       Each Voice Is Heard  380
       Shared Understanding of the Work  381
Prioritize and Shift 414
Side Benefits 415
Keys to Success 415
Integrate Sales and Development 416
Stop Sacrificing People and Quality:
  Have a Prioritized Project Portfolio 416
  Add Dedicated Teams, Not Random People 416
  Organization-wide Coordination 417
  Executive Support 417
Reference 417

Chapter 35  Risk Management in Scrum 419
The Story 419
The Model 420
  Customer Risk: Product Owner 421
  Social Risk: ScrumMaster 423
  Technical Risk: Development (Core) Team 423
In the End… 424
Keys to Success 424
  Let Go 424
  Let Agile 425
Works Consulted 425

Appendix  Scrum Framework 427
The Roles 428
  ScrumMaster 428
  Product Owner 428
  Development Team 428
The Artifacts 429
  The Product Backlog 429
  The Sprint Backlog 430
  The Burndown 431
The Meetings 431
  Planning Meeting 431
  Daily Scrum 432
  Sprint Review 433
  Sprint Retrospective 433
Putting It All Together 434

Index 435
by Jeff Sutherland

Mitch and I have worked together for many years training developers in Scrum. Studying this book can help users overcome the biggest challenges that have occurred in recent years as agile practices (75 percent of which are Scrum) have become the primary mode of software development worldwide.

Ten years after the Agile Manifesto was published, some of the original signatories and a larger group of agile thought leaders met at Snowbird, Utah, this time to do a retrospective on ten years of agile software development. They celebrated the success of the agile approach to product development and reviewed the key impediments to building on that success. And they came to unanimous agreement on four key success factors for the next ten years.

1. Demand technical excellence.
2. Promote individual change and lead organizational change.
3. Organize knowledge and improve education.
4. Maximize value creation across the entire process.

Let’s see how Mitch’s book can help you become an agile leader.

Demand Technical Excellence

The key factor driving the explosion of the Internet and the applications on smartphones has been deploying applications in short increments and getting rapid feedback from end users. This process is formalized in agility by developing products in short sprints, always a month or less and most often two weeks in length. We framed this issue in the Agile Manifesto by saying that “we value working software over comprehensive documentation.”

The Ten Year Agile Retrospective of the Manifesto concluded that the majority of agile teams are still having difficulty developing products in short sprints (usually because the management, the business, the customers, and the development teams do not demand technical excellence).

Engineering practices are fundamental to software development, and 17 percent of Scrum teams implement Scrum with XP engineering practices. The first Scrum team did so in 1993 before XP was even born. It is only common sense to professional engineers.
Mitch says in the first chapter that he considers certain XP practices to be mandatory—sustainable pace, collective code ownership, pair programming, test-driven development, continuous integration, coding standards, and refactoring. These are fundamental to technical excellence, and the 61 percent of agile teams using Scrum without implementing these practices should study Mitch’s book carefully and follow his guidance. Neglecting to use these mandatory XP practices is the reason they do not have shippable code at the end of their sprints!

Mitch’s book contains much more guidance on technical excellence, and agile leaders, whether they are in management or engineering, need to demand the technical excellence that Mitch articulates so well.

**Promote Individual Change and Lead Organizational Change**

Agile adoption requires rapid response to changing requirements along with technical excellence. This was the fourth principle of the Agile Manifesto—“respond to change over following a plan.” However, individuals adapting to change is not enough. Organizations must be structured for agile response to change. If not, they prevent the formation of, or destroy, high-performing teams because of failure to remove impediments that block progress.

Mitch steps through the Harvard Business School key success factors for change. A sense of urgency is needed. Change is impossible without it. Agile leaders need to live it. A guiding coalition for institutional transformation is essential. Agile leaders need to make sure management is educated, trained, on board, and participating in the Scrum implementation.

Creating a vision and empowering others is fundamental. Arbitrary decisions and command and control mandates will kill agile performance. Agile leaders need to avoid these disasters by planning for short-term wins, consolidating improvements, removing impediments, and institutionalizing new approaches. Agile leaders need to be part of management or must train management as well as engineering, and Mitch’s book can help you see what you need to do and how to do it.

**Organize Knowledge and Improve Education**

A large body of knowledge on teams and productivity is relatively unknown to most managers and many developers. Mitch talks about these issues throughout the book.

**Software Development Is Inherently Unpredictable**

Few people are aware of Ziv’s law: Software development is unpredictable. The large failure rate on projects worldwide is largely due to lack of understanding of this
problem and the proper approach to deal with it. Mitch describes the need to expect and adapt to constant change. The strategies in this book help you avoid many pitfalls and remove many blocks to your Scrum implementation.

**Users Do Not Know What They Want until They See Working Software**

Traditional project management erroneously assumes that users know what they want before software is built. This problem was formalized as Humphrey’s law, yet this law is systematically ignored in university and industry training of managers and project leaders. This book can help you work with this issue and avoid being blindsided.

**The Structure of the Organization Will Be Embedded in the Code**

A third example of a major problem that is not generally understood is Conway’s law: The structure of the organization will be reflected in the code. A traditional hierarchical organizational structure negatively impacts object-oriented design, resulting in brittle code, bad architecture, poor maintainability and adaptability, along with excessive costs and high failure rates. Mitch spends a lot of time explaining how to get the Scrum organization right. Listen carefully.

**Maximize Value Creation Across the Entire Process**

Agile practices can easily double or triple the productivity of a software development team if the product backlog is ready and software is done at the end of a sprint. This heightened productivity creates problems in the rest of the organization. Their lack of agility will become obvious and cause pain.

**Lack of Agility in Operations and Infrastructure**

As soon as talent and resources are applied to improve product backlog, the flow of software to production will at least double—and in some cases be five to ten times higher. This exposes the fact that development operations and infrastructure are crippling production and must be fixed.

**Lack of Agility in Management, Sales, Marketing, and Product Management**

At the front end of the process, business goals, strategies, and objectives are often not clear. This lack of clarity results in a flat or decaying revenue stream even when production of software doubles.

For this reason, everyone in an organization needs to be educated about and trained on how to optimize performance across the whole value stream. Agile individuals need
to lead this educational process by improving their ability to organize knowledge and train the whole organization.

**The Bottom Line**

Many Scrum implementations make only minor improvements and find it difficult to remove impediments that embroil them in constant struggle. Work can be better than this. All teams can be good, and many can be great! Work can be fun, business can be profitable, and customers can be really happy!

If you are starting out, Mitch’s book can help you. If you are struggling along the way, this book can help you even more. And if you are already great, Mitch can help you be greater. Improvement never ends, and Mitch’s insight is truly helpful.

—Jeff Sutherland
Scrum Inc.
FOREWORD
by Kenneth S. Rubin

In 1988, I was the first employee hired by ParcPlace Systems after the Smalltalk research team was spun out of Xerox PARC (Palo Alto Research Center). Our mission was to commercialize the use of object-oriented technology. During those early days of the object-technology movement, we often discussed writing a sort of recipe book to help companies get started with object technology. The idea was to collect the most important situations/issues that we saw companies encountering and present them as a set of patterns or recipes in the format, “If you find yourself in this situation, try doing the following…” We never did write that particular book.

Fast-forward over 20 years to the era of agile development, and Mitch Lacey has written his own recipe book: a field guide on the topic of Scrum. In it, he shares his wealth of Scrum experience with companies that are gearing up to use Scrum or those that are still in the nascent stages of applying it.

I first met Mitch in 2007, shortly after I became the very first managing director of the worldwide Scrum Alliance. At that time, Mitch was already a Certified Scrum Trainer (CST) and had been applying Scrum for some number of years both inside Microsoft, where he was first exposed to Scrum, and later with both large and small companies as a Scrum trainer and coach.

I could tell from our first meeting that Mitch was passionate about helping people be successful with Scrum. At that first encounter, he took out his laptop and started walking me through data he had been collecting. His goal was to reinforce anecdotal success stories with real data drawn from his experiences. In hindsight, this exchange was foreshadowing for what was to become The Scrum Field Guide.

When you read this book, you will experience what I did during that 2007 conversation and in numerous discussions and debates I have had with Mitch ever since—that he has a keen ability to collect and analyze real-world experiences and synthesize them into actionable advice. You will benefit from this advice in each and every chapter! Each chapter begins with a story that captures the culmination of Mitch’s experiences on a specific topic. I find this technique to be very effective, since I like a good story and Mitch is quite an effective storyteller. But don’t just stop after reading a chapter’s intro story! Following each story is an expansion and interpretation of the concepts presented in the story that amplify the advice being offered.

One thing you will notice while reading this book is that Mitch isn’t trying to teach you theory. He’s trying to save your bacon. Even the major section names convey this intent: “Getting Prepared,” “Field Basics,” “First Aid,” “Advanced Survival Techniques,” and “Wilderness Essentials.” A true field guide indeed!
You also have the benefit of reading the second edition of this book. Mitch has not been sitting still since the first edition was published in 2012. This new edition includes updated versions of many of the original chapters as well as five completely new chapters in the new section “Wilderness Essentials.” These chapters address topics as diverse as “getting to done,” the relationship of story points to hours, techniques for interviewing and hiring, how to align incentives with outcomes, and the all-important topic of managing risk during agile development. If you are already familiar with the first edition, I am sure you will benefit from the changes and additions Mitch has made to this latest edition!

It is an honor to have Mitch and The Scrum Field Guide, Second Edition, in the same book series as my Essential Scrum book: The Mike Cohn Signature Series. I have high regard for the authors and books in this series. They all pass my litmus test: “Would I recommend a book in the series to my clients without reservations?” I am happy to say that I can definitely recommend Mitch’s book!

And, for those readers who are familiar with my book, Essential Scrum: A Practical Guide to the Most Popular Agile Process, I am confident that you will find my book and this book to be good complements to one another, even (and especially) where the two differ on particular issues or approaches. And, apparently, many others agree! A quick look on Amazon.com at the first edition of The Scrum Field Guide shows that the book most frequently purchased along with it is my Essential Scrum book. So, like fine wine and cheese, I hope you enjoy the pairing!

—Kenneth S. Rubin
Managing Principal, Innolution, LLC,
and author of Essential Scrum:
A Practical Guide to the Most Popular Agile Process
Welcome to the Second Edition of *The Scrum Field Guide*

When I mentioned that I was thinking of updating the original *Field Guide*, my wife questioned my sanity. After all, she reminded me, the first book had nearly done me in. Yet as I reflected on my first effort, I felt that not only did I have more to say, but I also wanted to adjust some of the content I’d already published. Put simply, I wanted to refactor, add some new features, and release a 2.0 version. So here we are.

You should still read this book in the same way you did the first edition: Pick a chapter that addresses a problem you see in your company—and read it. Then go apply my advice and see what happens.

Agile is a journey. I’ve learned a great deal since the first edition was published in 2012. If you have read this book before, you will immediately see that I have added new ideas and concepts to the original chapters. Many chapters have been rewritten by more than 80 percent; others by only 10 percent. You will see a new section: Part V, “Wilderness Essentials,” containing additional tips for the field, inspired by my firsthand experience working with organizations around the globe. These new chapters include managing risks, interviewing, the fallacy of getting it right the first time, and more.

How This Book Came to Be

When my daughter Emma was born, I felt out of my depth. We seemed to be at the doctor’s office much more than we had been with our other children. I kept asking my wife, “Is this normal?” One night, I found my wife’s copy of *What to Expect the First Year* on my pillow with a note from her: “Read this. You’ll feel better.”

And I did. Knowing that everything we were experiencing was normal for my child, even if it wasn’t typical for me or observed before, made me feel more confident and secure. This was around the same time I was starting to experiment with Scrum and agile. As I encountered obstacles and ran into unfamiliar situations, I began to realize that what I really needed was a *What to Expect* book for the first year (and even beyond) of Scrum and XP.

The problem is, unlike a *What to Expect* book, I can’t tell you exactly what your team should be doing or worrying about during months 1 to 3 or 9 to 12. Teams, unlike most children, don’t develop at a predictable rate. Instead, they often tumble, stumble, and bumble their way through their first year, taking two steps forward and
one step back as they learn to function as a team, adopt agile engineering practices, build trust with their customers, and work in an incremental and iterative fashion.

With this in mind, I chose to structure this book with more of an “I’ve got a pain here, what should I do” approach. I’ve collected stories about teams I’ve been a part of or witnessed in their first year of agile life. As I continued down my agile path, I noticed that the stories and the patterns in companies were usually similar. I would implement an idea in one company and tweak it for the next. In repeating this process, I ended up with a collection of real-world solutions that I now carry in my virtual tool belt. In this book, I share with you some of the most common pains and solutions. When your team is hurting or in trouble, you can turn to the chapter that most closely matches your symptoms and find, if not a cure, at least a way to relieve the pain.

_The Scrum Field Guide, Second Edition_, is meant to help you fine-tune your own implementation, navigate some of the unfamiliar terrain, and more easily scale the hurdles we all encounter along the way.

**Who Should Read This Book**

If you are thinking about getting started with Scrum or agile, are at the beginning of your journey, or have been at it a year or so but feel like you’ve gotten lost along the way, this book is for you. I’m officially targeting companies that are within six months of starting a project to those that are a year into their implementation—an 18-month window.

This is a book for people who are pragmatic. If you are looking for theory and esoteric discussions, grab another of the many excellent books on Scrum and agile. If, on the other hand, you want practical advice and real data based on my experience running projects both at Microsoft and while coaching teams and consulting at large Fortune 100 companies, this book fits the bill.

**How to Read This Book**

The book is designed for you to be able to read any chapter, in any order, at any time. Each chapter starts out with a story pulled from a team, company, or project that I worked on or coached. As you might expect, I’ve changed the names to protect the innocent (and even the guilty). Once you read the story, which will likely sound familiar in some fashion, I walk you through the model. The model is what I use in the field to help address the issues evident in the story. Some of the models might feel uncomfortable, or you might believe they won’t work for your company. I urge you to fight the instinct to ignore the advice or to modify the model. Try it at least three times and see what happens. You might be surprised. At the end of each chapter, I summarize the keys to success—those factors that can either make or break your implementation.
This book is organized in five parts.

- Part I, “Getting Prepared,” gives you advice on getting started with Scrum, helping you set up for success. If you are just thinking about Scrum or are just beginning to use it, start there.
- Part II, “Field Basics,” discusses items that, once you get started down the agile path, help you over some of the initial stumbling blocks that teams and organizations encounter. If you’ve gotten your feet wet with Scrum but are running into issues, you might want to start here.
- Part III, “First Aid,” is where I deal with some of the larger, deeper issues that companies face, such as adding people to projects or fixing dysfunctional daily standup meetings. These are situations you’ll likely find yourself in at one point or another during your first year. These chapters help you triage and treat the situation, allowing your team to return to a healthy state.
- Part IV, “Advanced Survival Techniques,” contains a series of items that teams seem to struggle with regardless of where they are in their adoption—things such as costing projects, writing contacts, and addressing documentation in agile and Scrum projects.
- Part V, “Wilderness Essentials,” contains chapters that focus on overlooked, yet just as costly, problems that most organizations face when they are in the middle of their agile adoption, such as managing risks, interviewing, getting it right the first time, and more.

If you are starting from scratch and have no idea what Scrum is, I’ve included a short description in the appendix to help familiarize you with the terms. You might also want to do some more reading on Scrum before diving into this book.

Why You Should Read This Book

Regardless of where we are on our agile journey, we all need a friendly reminder that what we are experiencing is normal, some suggestions on how to deal with issues, and a few keys for success. This book gives you all that in a format that allows you to read only the chapter you need, an entire section, or the whole thing. Its real-life situations will resonate with you, and its solutions can be applied by any team. Turn the page and read the stories. This field guide will become a trusted companion as you experience the highs and lows of Scrum and Extreme Programming.

Supplemental Material for This Book

Throughout this book, you may find yourself thinking, “I wish I had a tool or downloadable template to help me implement that concept.” In many cases, you do. If you
go to http://www.mitchlacey.com/supplements/, you will find a list of various files, images, spreadsheets, and tools that I use in my everyday Scrum projects. While some of the information is refined, most of the stuff is pretty raw. Why? For my projects, I don’t need it to be pretty; I need it to be functional and to work. What you get from my website supplements will be raw, true, and from the trenches.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I first had the idea for this book, it was raw. Little did I know that I was attempting to boil the ocean. My wife, Bernice, kept me grounded, as did my kids. Without their strength, this book would not be here today.

David Anderson, Ward Cunningham, and Jim Newkirk were all instrumental in helping me and my first team get off the ground at Microsoft. Each of them worked there at the time and coached us through some rough periods. I still look back at my notes from an early session with Ward, with a question highlighted that read, “Can’t we just skip TDD?” Each of these three people helped turn our team of misfits into something that was really special. David, Ward, and Jim—thank you.

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Mitch Lacey, founder of Mitch Lacey & Associates, Inc., helps companies reach full potential by building performing organizations through the adoption of agile practices, including Scrum and XP.

Mitch is a self-described tech nerd who started his technology career in 1991 at Accolade Software, a computer gaming company. After working as a software test engineer, a test manager, a developer, and at a variety of other jobs in between, he settled on his true calling—project and program management.

Mitch was a formally trained program manager before adding agile to his project tool belt in 2005. He first practiced agile at Microsoft Corporation, where he successfully released core enterprise services for MSN and assisted in driving agile adoption across multiple divisions.

Mitch's first agile team was coached by Ward Cunningham, Jim Newkirk, and David Anderson. He has worked extensively in all Scrum roles on a variety of projects. Today, with decades of experience under his belt, Mitch continues to develop his craft by experimenting and practicing with both leadership and project teams at many different organizations.

Mitch's rich, practical experience and his pragmatic approach are trusted by many companies including Adobe Systems, Aera Energy, Bio-Rad, EchoStar, Microsoft, Oracle, Qualcomm, Salem Hospital, SAP, Sony, and more. He is a Certified Scrum Trainer (CST), a PMI Project Management Professional (PMP), and an Agile Certified Practitioner (ACP).

Mitch has presented at a variety of conferences worldwide, chaired Agile2012 and Agile2014, and served on the board of directors for the Scrum Alliance and the Agile Alliance.

For more information, visit www.mitchlacey.com, where you will find Mitch's blog as well as a variety of articles, tools, and videos that will help you with your Scrum and agile adoption. He can also be found on Twitter at @mglacey and by email at mitch@mitchlacey.com.
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Chapter 27

DOCUMENTATION IN SCRUM PROJECTS

We’ve all heard the common myth, *Agile means no documentation*. While other agile fallacies exist, this is a big one, and it could not be farther from the truth. Good agile teams are disciplined about their documentation but are also deliberate about how much they do and when. In this chapter’s story, we find a duo struggling to explain that while they won’t be fully documenting everything up front, they will actually be more fully documenting the entire project from beginning to end.

The Story

“Hey, you two,” said Ashley, stopping Carter and Noel in the hallway as they passed by her office. “I’ve been sensing some resistance from you over the initial project documentation. I need it by next Friday for project sign off, okay?” Ashley looked back at her computer and began typing again, clearly expecting a quick answer.

Carter and Noel looked at each other, then back at Ashley, their manager, before replying. They had known this conversation was coming but didn’t realize they’d be accosted in the hallway by an obviously harried Ashley when it did.

“Listen, we can document everything up front like you ask,” Noel began, as she and Carter moved to stand close to Ashley’s doorway. “But we don’t think it’s the best approach. Things change, and we cannot promise you that things will go as planned. Further—” Ashley stopped typing and looked up, interrupting Noel mid-stream.

“Look, I don’t want to argue about something as basic as documentation. I just need it on my desk by Friday.”

Carter spoke up.

“Ashley,” he began. “Can I have five minutes to communicate a different approach? I know you have a full plate, but I think it’s important for you to try to understand this point before we table our discussion.”

Ashley glanced at her watch and nodded. “Five minutes. Go.”

“When I was in college, I worked for our university newspaper,” Carter explained. “I was a sports photographer and always attended local football games with the sports writers. I was on the field, and they were in the stands.

“It probably won’t surprise you to hear that not one of those sports writers came to the football game with the story already written. Now, they might have done some
research on the players. They might have talked to the coaches about their game plans. They might even have asked me to be sure to get some shots of particular players. But they never wrote the article before the game even began.

“That’s kind of what you are asking us to do with the software. You want the complete story of how this application will unfold, including the final game score, before we’ve even started playing,” said Carter.

Ashley replied, “Well, that’s how we get things done around here. Without the up-front documentation—design docs, use cases, master requirements docs, architectural designs, and release plans—I won’t get project approval, and I can’t be sure that you two and the rest of the team understand what we need to build.”

“Right. I get that,” agreed Carter. “It’s not unreasonable for you to want some information before we get started. And you should expect to receive frequent updates from us on what’s going on with the project. After all, the reporters I used to work with would take notes and write snippets of the article about the game as it was unfolding. Periodically, we would get together to discuss the angle they were working on and some of the shots I had captured so far.

“But to ask us to tell you what the software will look like, exactly how much it will cost, and precisely when we’ll be done is like asking us to predict the final score of the football game. We can tell you how we think it’s going to go, but when things are changing and unfolding, it’s difficult to predict all the details.”

Ashley nodded. “But things aren’t always that volatile with our projects. We know basically what we want this to look like. It’s only some of the features we aren’t sure of.”

“Right,” chimed in Noel. “And on projects where we can nail down most of the variables and have a clear picture of the final product, we can give you more up-front documentation.”

Carter nodded. “To go back to my sports writer analogy, there were times when one team was clearly dominating—the game was a blowout. In those cases, the reporters had their stories mostly written by halftime. They’d already come up with the headline, filled in a lot of the details, and were just waiting until the end of the game to add the final stats and score.

“Most times, though, the games were close and the outcome uncertain. In those cases, the reporters would keep filling in the skeleton of the story with the events as they happened in real time. They would come down to the field at halftime, and we would discuss the unfolding story. We’d strategize and say, ‘If the game goes this way, we’ll take this approach. But if it goes that way, we’ll take this other approach.’

“Likewise, the level of detail in our documentation at any given point in the project should depend on how certain we are that things aren’t going to change.”

Ashley leaned back in her chair with her hand on her chin, deep in thought. Noel decided to go in for the kill.

“Ashley, remember the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, or the quake and tsunami in Japan? Or when either Reagan or Kennedy were shot?”

Ashley nodded.
“Well, you would notice a trend in all these events. In the initial accounts, the media headlines conveyed the tragic event, but with very few details. All they could tell us at first was generally what had happened (explosion/quake/tsunami/shots fired), when, and where. Why? Because the events were still unfolding, and that was all anyone knew. As the reporters on scene learned more, they added the new facts and changed the headlines.

“All the little updates, facts, and details were important to capture in real time, even if they later had to be changed to reflect new information. Without continuous briefings, many of the details surrounding the events would have been forgotten in the chaos of the devastation. The reporters didn’t try to write more up front than the facts they knew. Instead, the reporters recorded what they did know as they went along. Later, after the details had solidified, they went back through the various articles and wrote a larger, encompassing synopsis that outlined the specific event from the initial reports to the current state,” Noel explained.

“That’s what we’re suggesting we do: Make our documentation a story in progress. Are we making sense?” asked Carter.

Ashley sat forward.

“I think I get it now. What I originally heard you say was, ‘I can’t give you documentation.’ But what you’re actually saying is that you will document certain things up front, most things in real time, updating them as necessary to reflect reality, and some things after the fact. But what does that mean in terms of software exactly? I need certain documents to get the project approved, such as the master requirements documentation outlining all the use cases.”

Noel answered, “We will provide that MRD, but it will be in the form of a product backlog, with stories at different levels of detail. Some of the stories will be headlines only. Others will be fully fleshed out, maybe to the point of use cases. For example, the team has a good idea of the architectural direction, which gives us insight into what stories to build for the first six or so sprints, but after that, things get fuzzy. We know that you want us to capture the details, and we have those details for the higher-priority stories, but we don’t have them for the stories off in the distance. For those, we might only have headline-level information.”

Ashley asked, “But if we don’t capture details up front, won’t they get lost? And don’t you then have to spend a significant amount of time getting and documenting that information during the project, if they can be found at all? How can you ensure that what is being built is correct?”

“Remember, like any good journalist, we will document as we go, as soon as we can, without doing too much. That way when we get to the point where the UI stabilizes, let’s say, we can create the more detailed documentation that the company needs and that we need to deliver in the form of user manuals and such. We won’t lose our details because we’ll be going over those details every sprint with the team, documenting them as part of our definition of done, and checking with the stakeholders to ensure we’re on track, to ensure that what is being asked is what we are building and
matches what the customers meant. Keeping documentation up to date a little at a time is just part of the cost of building working software. If things change along the way, we will update what we have written to reflect the change. It’s a balance between stability and volatility. The more volatile something is, the more careful we need to be in what level we document. If it’s stable, we can do something such as a large database diagram model in a tool. If it’s volatile, we might just draw a picture on the whiteboard—again, both are documents, database models to be exact, but they are very different in terms of formality,” finished Noel.

“So, are we on the same page?” asked Carter.

“Yes,” said Ashley. “I get it now. I think this is a good approach and something that I will advocate, provided you give me regular feedback so I can update executive management. But I still need the big headlines by Friday. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” said Carter and Noel together.

And that was that.

The Model

Many people can quote the part of the Agile Manifesto that states, “Working software over comprehensive documentation,” but they fail to mention the very important explanatory component that follows: “While there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more” [BECK]. Scrum teams still value documentation; they just change the timing of that documentation to be more consistent with their level of knowledge.

For example, imagine you are in a university world history class. You get to the point in the class when it’s time to discuss Western European history. Your professor says, “I want each of you to buy my new book Western European History: The 30th Century. Come prepared for an exam on the first five chapters in two weeks.”

You would probably look around the room, wondering if what you just heard was correct and ask a fellow student, “Did he just say thirtieth century history?”

Common sense tells you that without time machines, it is impossible to read a factual account of future events—they haven’t happened yet! Sure, there are predictors and indicators that suggest what might happen, but nothing is certain. This then begs the question: If this approach is wrong for a university class that may reach a few thousand, why is the exact same approach accepted when developing software that has the potential to reach millions?

Before we’ve begun any work on a project, we are often asked for exact details as to what will be delivered, by when, and at what cost. To determine these things, teams often write volumes of documents detailing how the system will work, the interfaces, the database table structures—everything. They are, in essence, writing a history of things that have yet to occur. And it’s just as ludicrous for a software team to do it as it would be for your history professor.
That doesn’t mean we should abandon documents, and it doesn’t mean that we should leave everything until the end, either. A certain amount of documentation is essential at each stage of a project. Up front, we use specifications or user stories to capture ideas and concepts on paper so that we can communicate project goals and strategies. When we sign off on these plans, we agree that what we have documented is the right thing to do.

The question, then, is not whether we should document, but what we should document and when. The answer has everything to do with necessity, volatility, and cost.

Why Do We Document?

Every project needs a certain amount of documentation. In a 1998 article on Salon.com titled “The Dumbing-Down of Programming,” author Ellen Ullman notes how large computer systems “represented the summed-up knowledge of human beings” [ULLMAN]. When it comes to system documentation, we need to realize that we’re not building or writing for us; we are writing for the future. I think Ullman summarizes it best with this snippet from the same article:

*Over time, the only representation of the original knowledge becomes the code itself, which by now is something we can run but not exactly understand. It has become a process, something we can operate but no longer rethink deeply. Even if you have the source code in front of you, there are limits to what a human reader can absorb from thousands of lines of text designed primarily to function, not to convey meaning. When knowledge passes into code, it changes state; like water turned to ice, it becomes a new thing, with new properties. We use it, but in a human sense we no longer know it.*

Why is Ullman’s concept of code as a process that changes state important? Because we need to realize that, in a human sense, we use the system and we know the system. That is why we document.

So, what is essential to document, and what is needless work? Much of that depends on the type of system you are building and the way in which you work. Teams that are colocated need to document less than do teams distributed across continents and time zones. Teams that are building banking systems need to satisfy more regulatory requirements than do teams building marketing websites. The key is to document as much as you need and nothing more.

What Do We Document?

The list of essential documents is different for every project. Going through my list of past projects, some frequent documentation items include the following:

- End-user manual
- Operations user guide
We didn’t write all these documents before the project began. And we didn’t wait until the final sprint to start them either. We did them as the information became available. Many of the user stories, for instance, were written up front. But some of them were changed, and others were added as the project progressed and requirements became clearer. Our unit tests were written as we coded. And at the end of every sprint, we updated the end-user manual to reflect new functionality. We included in our definition of done what we would document and when we would write it (see Chapter 7, “How Do You Know You’re Done?”).

When and How Do We Document?

So, if we don’t do it all up front and we don’t save it all for the end, how does documentation happen in an agile project? Documentation, any documentation, costs money. The more time it takes to write and update, the more it costs. What agile projects strive to do is minimize write time, maintenance time, rework costs, and corrections.

Let’s look at a few approaches we can take when documenting our projects:

- Document heavily in the beginning.
- Document heavily in the end.
- Document as we go along.

Document Heavily in the Beginning

Traditional projects rely on early documentation. As you can see from the diagram in Figure 27-1, a typical waterfall team must capture requirements, build a project plan, document the system architecture, write test plans, and do other such documentation at the beginning of the project. If we were to overlay a line that represented working software, it would not begin to move up until the gray line started to flatten.
The benefit of this approach is that people feel more secure about the system being built. The major drawback is that this sense of security is misleading. In point of fact, though a great deal of time, effort, and money has gone into writing the documents, no working software has yet been created. The chances of getting everything right up front are marginal on stable projects and next to zero on volatile projects. That means factoring in costly rework and extra time. Chances are good that these high-priced, feel-good documents will turn into dusty artifacts on the project bookcase.

**Document Heavily at the End**

When we document heavily at the end, we document as little as possible as the software is developed and save all the material needed to release, sustain, and maintain the system over time until the end of the project. Figure 27-2 illustrates this approach.

The benefits of this approach are that working software is created quickly and that what is eventually written should reflect what the system does.

There are many problems with this approach. People often forget what was done and when, and what decisions were made and why. Team members on the project at the end are not necessarily the people on the project in the beginning; departing team members take much of their knowledge with them when they go. After the code for a project is complete, there is almost always another high-priority project that needs attention. What usually happens is that most of the team members move on to the new project, leaving the remaining team members to create the documentation for the system by themselves. Countless hours are spent hunting for data and trying to track down and access old team members, who are busy with new work and no longer have time for something "as insignificant as documentation."
Though saving documentation until the end is cheaper in the beginning because more time is spent on actual software development, it is usually expensive in the end because it can hold up a release or cause support and maintenance issues, as it will likely contain gaps and faulty information.

Document as We Go Along

Agile projects do things differently. We acknowledge that while we can’t know everything up front, we do want to know some things. We also maintain that documentation should be part of each story’s definition of done, so that it is created, maintained, and updated in real time, as part of the cost of creating working software. Figure 27-3 illustrates the document-as-we-go approach.
The product owner works with the stakeholders and customers to build the requirements while the team works with the product owner to achieve emergent design and architecture. The team keeps the code clean, creates automated tests, and uses code comments and other tools to slowly build other required documentation for the system, such as the user manuals, operations guide, and more.

The one drawback is that it does take a little longer to code when you document as you go than it would to fly through the code without having to write a comment or update an architectural diagram. This drawback is more than offset, though, by the benefits. There is less waste, less risk of eleventh-hour holdups, and more emphasis on working software. Much of the documentation is updated automatically as changes are made to the code, reducing maintenance and rework costs. Just as news reports capture the details of a story for posterity, real-time documentation of decisions and behavior minimizes gaps in knowledge and creates a living history of the software for future teams and projects.

Documenting in an Agile Project

So, we agree that in most cases, agile teams will want to document as they go. What exactly does that look like on a typical software project? To illustrate, let’s use a document that is familiar to almost everyone: the user manual. A waterfall approach would be to write the entire manual at the end. We’ve discussed why this method is a workable but risky solution. The more agile way to approach a user manual is to include “update the user manual” as one of the acceptance criteria for a story that has to do with user-facing functionality. By doing that, the manual is updated each time working software is produced.

Let’s say, for example, that I’m writing the user manual for an update to Adobe Lightroom (my current favorite piece of software). I’m in sprint planning, and the product owner explains that the story with the highest priority is “As an Adobe Lightroom user, I can export a series of photographs to Adobe Photoshop so I can stitch them together to make a panorama.” As we’re talking through that story, I recommend that we add “update user manual to reflect new functionality” as one of the acceptance criteria for that story.

As I write the code or as I finish the feature, I would also edit a document that provides the user instructions on how to use the feature. Depending on how stable the feature is, I might even include screenshots that walk the user through the instructions for both Lightroom and Photoshop. If the feature is less stable, meaning the core components are built but the user interface team is still hashing out the user interface through focus groups, I would document the behavior but probably only include placeholders for the screenshots. The key here is that the story would not be done until the user manual is updated.

Updating the user manual would be appropriate to do at the story level, as I described, but could also be accomplished at the sprint level. For instance, if we have
several stories that revolve around user-facing functionality, we might add a story during sprint planning that says, “As a user, I want to be able to learn about all the new functionality added during this sprint in my user manual.”

What I am doing is balancing stability versus volatility of the feature to determine how deep I go and when. It would not, for example, be prudent to make updating the user manual part of the definition of done for a task. Too much might change before the story is complete. Nor would it be acceptable to wait to update the user manual until right before a release. That’s far too late to start capturing the details of the new behaviors.

When determining when to document your own systems, you also should balance cost, volatility, and risk. (For more on determining your definition of done, refer to Chapter 7.)

**Starting Projects without Extensive Documentation**

One challenge you will face is to help stakeholders and customers understand why you are not documenting everything up front. Tell them a story similar to the one Carter told at the beginning of this chapter (or share that story with them). Remind them that while documenting heavily up front drives down the perceived risk, you never know what you don’t know until a working solution is in place.

Eschewing extensive documentation up front does not mean you are off the hook for a project signoff piece. But it does mean that the piece will look different to your stakeholders than it has on other projects. Rather than give them the specific artifacts they request, answer the questions they are asking in regard to schedules and requirements in the most lightweight way possible for your project and situation. A PMO might, for instance, ask for a Microsoft Project plan, but what the PMO really wants to know is what will be done by about when. By the same token, a stakeholder might ask you for a detailed specification, when what she really wants to know is, “Are you and I on the same page with regard to what I’m asking you to do?”

Signoff and approval will occur early and often. The product owner will hold many story workshops to build the product backlog, work with the team to build the release plan, and then communicate that information to all interested parties, soliciting enough feedback to ensure that the team will deliver what the stakeholders had in mind (which is rarely exactly what they asked for). The documents the product owner uses for these tasks are only a mode of transportation for ideas and concepts, and a document is not the only way to transfer those ideas. Up-front documentation can just as easily take the form of pictures of whiteboard drawings, sketches, mockups, and the like—it does not need to be a large formal document.

The beginning of the project is when you know the least about what you are building and when you have the most volatility. What your stakeholders need is the peace of mind that comes from knowing you understand what they need and can give them some idea of how long it will take to deliver. Expend the least amount of effort possible
while still giving them accurate information and reassurance. At this point in the project, everything can and will change.

**Keys to Success**

The keys to success are simple:

- **Decide**—Determine what you need to document for your project and when it makes the most sense to produce that documentation. Some things, such as code comments, are easy to time. Other items, such as threat models, are more difficult. Work as a team with your product owner to determine the must-have documents at each stage of your project.

- **Commit**—Once you have a documentation plan, stick to it. Put it in your definition of done. Hold yourselves accountable. Documentation is never fun, even when it’s broken into small chunks. Remind your team that a little bit of pain will eliminate a great deal of risk come release time.

- **Communicate**—If this is the first project to move forward without extensive up-front documentation, the stakeholders will be nervous. Help them out, especially at the beginning of the project, by sending frequent updates, pictures of whiteboards, and any other documents that are produced. Do as your math teacher always told you: show your work. Seeing working software and physical artifacts goes a long way toward calming the fears of even the most anxious executives.

- **Invest in automation**—Documentation is easier and ultimately cheaper if you invest a little time in automating either the system or the documentation itself. For example, if you can create an automated script to compile all the code comments and parse them into documentation, you’ve saved a manual step and instantly made your documentation more in sync with the actual code. It’s also much easier to document acceptance test results and API documents automatically than it is to do it manually. On the flip side, you might find that automating the features themselves can save you a lot of documentation work. For example, a manual installation process might require a 40-page installation guide; an automated installation process, on the other hand, probably needs only a one-page guide and is better for the end user as well. Whenever possible, automate either your documentation or the features it supports. The results are well worth the investment.

Being agile does not equate to no documentation; it means doing timely, accurate, responsible documentation. Make sure that documentation is equally represented in your team’s definition of done alongside things like code and automation. Remember that when change happens, it’s not just the code that changes—the entire software
package that you are delivering changes, documentation included. Lastly, remember that as much as you might wish otherwise, documentation is a part of every software project. When you do a little at a time and automate as much as possible, you’ll find that while it’s still an obligation, it’s not nearly as much of a chore.

References


Acceptance tests, in TDD, 129–131
Acceptance window, contractual agreement, 362
Accountability, team consultants, 47–48
Active task limit (ATL), in collaboration, 373–377
Agenda, daily Scrum meeting, 209–210
Agile teams, successful outsourcing, 332
Aligning incentives with outcomes
aligning around customer satisfaction, 412–413
early involvement of development teams, 413
end-to-end delivery model, 412–415
prioritizing project portfolios, 414–415
setting the focus, 412–415
shifting resources, 414–415
side benefits, 415
a story, 409–412
Aligning incentives with outcomes, keys to success
dedicated teams versus random people, 416
executive support, 417
integrating sales and development, 416
organization-wide coordination, 417
prioritizing project portfolios, 416
Allocating work, successful outsourcing, 333
Anarchic projects, technology and requirements, 14
Artifacts. See Scrum, artifacts; specific artifacts.
ATL (active task limit), in collaboration, 373–377
Automated integration, in TDD, 129–131
Automating documentation, 323
Backlog. See Product backlog,
Beginner’s mind, 225–226, 230–231
Belshee, Arlo, 223, 225–227, 230
The Big Wall technique
description, 342
example, 342–346
a story, 340–341
Blind estimation of team velocity. See also Estimating team velocity,
decomposing the reference story, 59
estimating velocity, 60–61
versus other techniques, 66
overview, 58–61
points-to-hours approximation, 59
product backlog, 58
team capacity, 59–60
Blocking issues, daily Scrum meeting, 207–208
Boehm, Barry, 171, 357
Brainstorming, 96–97
Breaking up fights, role of the ScrumMaster, 113
Brooks, Fred, 45
Brooks’ law (adding manpower to late projects), 45, 233, 398–399
Budgets, true costs of outsourcing, 330–332
Bugs. See Defect management.
Burndown charts
description, 431
sustainable pace, 273–274
Burnout, 269–275
Bus factor, 214
“Buy a Feature” game, 199
Cadence, daily Scrum meeting, 213
Canceling the sprint, 259–260
Candidate screening. See Immersive interviewing, candidate screening.
Cards, collecting user stories, 306–307
Career Builder.com, 399–400
Carnegie, Dale, 252–253
Carnegie principles, team culture, 253
Categorizing issues, definition of done, 97–98
Chairs in meetings. See Standing versus sitting.
Change, role of the ScrumMaster, 115
Change, stages of
chaos, 16
foreign elements, 16
Kotter’s eight-step model, 30
late status quo, 15–16
new status quo, 17
practice and integration, 16–17
Satir’s Stages of Change, 15–17
Change management, contractual agreement, 353–356, 361
Chaos, stage of change, 16
Clark, Kim, 374
Cleland-Huang, Jane, 308
Client role, combining with other roles, 75–77
Code debt. See Technical debt.

Code reviews, pair programming as real-time reviews, 129

Code smells, 125–126

Coding standards, definition, 13

Cohn, Mike
  collaboration, 371
  consolidation, 98
  data collection, 64
  outsourcing, 329
  on customers, 362

Collaboration. See also Teams.
  ATL (active task limit), 373–377
  keys to success, 380–382
  pair programming, 373
  relative sizing and time estimation, 372
  shortening sprints, 377–378
  a story, 367–371
  task boards, 378–380
  two-week sprints, 377–378
  work items, limiting, 373–377

Collaboration, estimating tasks. See also Task Poker.
  ATL (active task limit), 373–377
  in collaboration, 371–373
  open items, limiting, 373–377
  a story, 367–371
  Task Poker, 371–373

Collective code ownership, 12

Commitment, Scrum value, 8

Communication
  emergency procedures, 260
  enlisting Scrum support, 31–32
  release planning, 155
  retrospective meetings, 197
  Scrum vision, 31–32
  successful outsourcing, 335

Competencies. See Skills and competencies.

Completing a project. See Delivering working software; Done, defining.

Complex projects, technology and requirements, 14

Complicated projects, technology and requirements, 14

Cone of Uncertainty, 357

Confirmation, collecting user stories, 307

Conflict avoidance, daily Scrum meetings, 221

Conformity, team culture, 247–249

Consolidating improvements, 33

issues, 98–100

Contingency plans. See Emergency procedures.

Continuous integration
  definition, 13
  successful outsourcing, 335
  in TDD, 126–128

Continuous learning
  daily Scrum meetings, 221
  implementing Scrum, 18

Contracts
  acceptance window, 362
  customer availability, 361–362
  keys to success, 361–363
  prioritization, 362–363
  ROI cutoff, 363
  a story, 349–353
  trust factor, 363

Contracts, project model
  change management, 361
  deliverables, 360–361

Contracts, ranges and changes model
  change management, 361
  cost estimation, 359–360
  cost per sprint, estimating, 360
  discovery contract, 358–360
  overview, 358
  payment options, specifying, 360
  project contracts, 360–361
  release planning, 360
  team velocity, determining, 360
  timeline, determining, 359–360
  versus traditional contracts, 358
  user stories, creating and estimating, 359
  user types ( personas), identifying, 359

Contracts, traditional model
  change management, 353–356
  Cone of Uncertainty, 357
  overview, 353–356
  timing, 356–358

Conversations, collecting user stories, 307

Conway’s law (organizational structure in the code), xxi

Core hours
  colocated teams, 138–140
  distributed teams, 140–141
  keys to success, 142
  part-time team members, 141–142
  a story, 135–138

Core teams. See also Development teams; Teams.
  early involvement. See Aligning incentives with outcomes.
  member responsibilities, 74
  optimal size, 45–46
  risk management, 423–424
  skills and competencies, 42–43
  a story, 35–39
  versus team consultants, 43–44, 46, 49. See also Team consultants.

Costs
  of a bad hire, 399–400
  documentation, 318–321
of immersive interviewing, 406
projects. See Estimating project cost.
release planning, 152–153
Courage, Scrum value, 8
Critical paths, implementing Scrum, 9–11
Cultural challenges, true costs of outsourcing, 329–330, 332
Culture, team
adding new members, 238
Carnegie principles, 253
conformity, 247–249
cultural goals, 247–250
empowerment, 252–253
innovation, 247–249
institutional means, 248
keys to success, 251–254
Merton's strain theory, 246–251
Merton's topology of deviant behavior, 246–251
rebellion, 247–249
retreatism, 247–249
ritualism, 247–249
role in outsourcing, 329, 332
social deviance, 246
sprint length, 86
a story, 241–246
Daily Scrum meetings
agenda, 209–210
blocking issues, 207–208
bus factor, 214
cadence, 213
common obstacles, 205, 208
conflict avoidance, 221
continuous learning, 221
deep dives, 210–211
description, 432–433
fourth question, 432
glossing over problems, 212
hand signals, 211
hidden impediments, 212–213
interruptions, 210
keys to success, 212–213
layout, 209–210
legacy systems, 180
nonverbal communication, 221
punctuality, 209
rambling, 210–211
rhythm, 209–210
scheduling, 208–209
standard three questions, 432
standing versus sitting, 214
a story, 205–208
successful outsourcing, 333–334
team consultants, 47
teamwork, 214
vagueness, 212
Daily standup meetings. See Daily Scrum meetings.
Data collection
historical data, 391–393
retrospective meetings, 198–199
sample table, 392
in story points, 391–393
Data gathered over time model, sustained engineering, 179
Dates. See Planning; Scheduling.
Debt. See Technical debt.
Decomposing stories
estimating team velocity, 59
example, 161–164
granularity, 167
a story, 157–159
Decomposing tasks
estimating task sizes, 164–167
example, 164–167
granularity, 167
sprint length, 87
a story, 157–159
Decomposing themes
example, 162–163
granularity, 167
Dedicated team model, sustained engineering, 179–182
Dedicated teams. See Core teams.
Dedicated time model, sustained engineering, 178
Deep dives, daily Scrum meeting, 210–211
Defect management
frequent testing, 171
keys to success, 172–173
on legacy systems, 173
overview, 170–172
pair programming, 129
setting priorities, 171–172
a story, 169–170
value, optimizing and measuring, 295
Definition of done. See Delivering working software; Done, defining.
Degree of confidence, release planning, 148–151
Delivering working software. See also Done, defining.
end-to-end scenarios, 286–287
expansion, 283–284
identifying a core story, 281–282
keys to success, 284–287
limiting user access, 282–283
number of users, 282–283
prioritizing risk, 283
rework, 285–286
a story, 277–281
validation, 283–284
window of opportunity, 283
DeMarco, Tom, 274
Denne, Mark, 308
Derby, Esther, 198, 200–202
Design concept cards, 227
Development practices, true costs of outsourcing, 330
Development teams, definition, 428–429. See also Core teams.
Developmental stages, team growth, 235–237
Discovery contract, contractual agreement, 358–360
Documentation
in agile projects, 321–322
automating, 323
committing to, 323
common documents, list of, 317–318
cost, 318–321
explaining your process, 323
keys to success, 323–324
list of features and functions. See Sprint backlog.
planning for, 322–323
purpose of, 317
sprint review meeting decisions, 189–190
stability versus volatility, 322
starting projects without, 322–323
a story, 313–316
versus working software, 316–317
Documentation, approaches to
early, 318–319
late, 319–320
as you go, 320–321
Dollar demonstration, 285
Done, defining. See also Delivering working software.
brainstorming, 96–97
categorization, 97–98
consolidation, 98–100
creation and publishing, 100–101
exercise, 95–101
keys to success, 101
participants, 96
purpose of, 101
sorting, 98–100
a story, 93–95
in TDD, 132
team definition of done, 94
undone work, 101
Duration, sprint review meetings, 187
Duvall, Paul M., 128
Educating
individuals, TDD, 132–133
organizations, role of the ScrumMaster, 115
stakeholders, 298
Efficiency versus effectiveness, 274–275
Emergency procedures, team options
canceling the sprint, 259–260
communication, 260
don’t panic, 260–261
getting help, 258
keys to success, 260–261
maintaining focus, 261
overview, 257–258
reducing scope, 258–259
removing impediments, 258
a story, 255–257
Employee costs
estimating project costs, 308–309
outsourcing, 329
role of the ScrumMaster, 109–112
Empowerment
enlisting support for Scrum, 32–33
team culture, 252–253
End game, release planning, 153–154
Ending a project. See Delivering working software;
Done, defining.
End-to-end delivery model, 412–415
End-to-end scenarios, 286–287
Engineering practices. See Sustained engineering;
TDD (Test-Driven Development).
Environment
physical, retrospective meetings, 197–198
political, estimating team velocity, 57
product owner, sprint length, 86–87
Epics, definition, 160
Erdogmus, Hakan, 129
Estimates
becoming commitments, 387
as commitments, 54
in ranges, 385–386, 388–391
Estimates, relative
in cost estimation, 307–308
Fibonacci sequence, 59, 303
Estimating
hours from story points. See Story points.

product backlog. See Product backlog, prioritizing and estimating.

project resources. See Estimating project cost.

remaining workload. See Burndown.

tasks. See Tasks, estimating.

trends in task completion. See Burndown.

Estimating project cost
contractual agreement, 359–360

cost per sprint, 360

employee costs, 309

functional specifications, 307

keys to success, 310–311

MMF (minimal marketable feature) set, 308

outsourcing, true costs, 330–332

planning poker technique, 307

release planning, 309–310

roughly right versus precisely wrong, 307–308

a story, 301–305

team costs, 309

team velocity, 308–309

techniques for, 307–308

Estimating project cost, user stories cards, 306–307

confirmation, 307

conversations, 307

creating, 307–308

prioritizing, 308

sizing, 301–305, 307–308

three C’s, 307

Estimating team velocity
communicating estimates as ranges, 62–64

comparison of techniques, 65–66

estimates as commitments, 54

from historical data, 56–57, 66

keys to success, 65–66

multipliers, 64–65

political environment, 57

product owner and customer, 57

for project cost, 308

project size and complexity, 57

a story, 51–56

team newness, 57

truncated data collection, 64–65

variables, 57

wait and see (real data) method, 61–64

Estimating team velocity, by blind estimation
decomposing the reference story, 59

estimating velocity, 60–61

versus other techniques, 66

overview, 58–61

points-to-hours approximation, 59

product backlog, 58

team capacity, 59–60

Expansion, delivering working software, 283–284

Expendability of team members, 214

Extending sprint length, 92

External focus, pair programming, 225

Extreme Programming (XP). See XP (Extreme Programming).

Facilitation, role of the ScrumMaster, 114

Feathers, Michael, 182

Feature list. See Product backlog; Sprint backlog.

Feature work, 292–294

Fibonacci sequence, 59, 303

Finishing a project. See Delivering working software; Done, defining.

Focus, Scrum value, 8

Forecasting with immersive interviewing, 398

Foreign elements, stage of change, 16

Forming, stage of team development, 235–237

Fourth question, daily Scrum meetings, 217–221, 432

Fowler, Martin, 126, 182

Function list. See Product backlog; Sprint backlog.

Functional specifications, estimating project cost, 307

Gabrieli, John, 225

Geographic distance, costs of outsourcing, 332

Getting started. See Implementing Scrum.

Glossing over problems, daily Scrum meeting, 212

Granularity, decomposing stories, 167

Grenning, James, 371

Group cohesion, costs of outsourcing, 329

Guiding coalition, enlisting support for Scrum, 31

Hand signals, daily Scrum meeting, 211

Hedden, Trey, 225

Help, emergency procedures, 258

Helping out, role of the ScrumMaster, 114

Hiring

interviewing candidates. See Immersive interviewing.

outsourcing. See Outsourcing.

Historical data
collecting, 391–393

estimating team velocity, 56–57, 66

estimating workload, 393

Hitting the wall, 267–269

Hofstede, Geert, 329

Hohmann, Luke, 199

Humphrey’s law (gathering user requirements), xx

Expansion, delivering working software, 283–284

Expendability of team members, 214

Extending sprint length, 92

External focus, pair programming, 225

Extreme Programming (XP). See XP (Extreme Programming).

Facilitation, role of the ScrumMaster, 114

Feathers, Michael, 182

Feature list. See Product backlog; Sprint backlog.

Feature work, 292–294

Fibonacci sequence, 59, 303

Finishing a project. See Delivering working software; Done, defining.

Focus, Scrum value, 8

Forecasting with immersive interviewing, 398

Foreign elements, stage of change, 16

Forming, stage of team development, 235–237

Fourth question, daily Scrum meetings, 217–221, 432

Fowler, Martin, 126, 182

Function list. See Product backlog; Sprint backlog.

Functional specifications, estimating project cost, 307

Gabrieli, John, 225

Geographic distance, costs of outsourcing, 332

Getting started. See Implementing Scrum.

Glossing over problems, daily Scrum meeting, 212

Granularity, decomposing stories, 167

Grenning, James, 371

Group cohesion, costs of outsourcing, 329

Guiding coalition, enlisting support for Scrum, 31

Hand signals, daily Scrum meeting, 211

Hedden, Trey, 225

Help, emergency procedures, 258

Helping out, role of the ScrumMaster, 114

Hiring

interviewing candidates. See Immersive interviewing.

outsourcing. See Outsourcing.

Historical data
collecting, 391–393

estimating team velocity, 56–57, 66

estimating workload, 393

Hitting the wall, 267–269

Hofstede, Geert, 329

Hohmann, Luke, 199

Humphrey’s law (gathering user requirements), xx
IBM
key dimensions of cultural variety, 329
TDD, benefit in teams, 124–125

Immersive interviewing
cost of a bad hire, 399–400
definition, 398, 400–401
as a forecast, 398
hiring for the right reasons, 398–399
how to hire, 400–401
long-term fit versus short-term expertise, 400
organizational evaluation, 398
skills and competencies, 400
a story, 395–397

Immersive interviewing, candidate screening
managers and nontechnical people, 404
overview, 401–402
preparation and setup, 402–403
scoring candidates, 403–404
senior-level people versus junior-level, 402–403

Immersive interviewing, keys to success
focus on competencies, 405
hiring strong people, 406
investing in the process, 406
repeatable hiring process, 405
skills and competencies, 405–406
understanding costs, 406

Implementing Scrum. See also People, enlisting support of.
combining with Extreme Programming, 12–13
continuous learning, 18
exposing issues, 12
identifying critical paths, 9–11
keys to success, 17–18
learning base mechanics, 17
in midstream, 18
patience, 17–18
potentially shippable code, 13
Scrum planning versus traditional methods, 9–11
shifting mindsets, 9
a story, 1–6
time frame, 18
underlying values, 7–8
understanding the rules, 17

Improving existing code, 125–126. See also Refactoring.

Incentives, aligning with outcomes. See Aligning incentives with outcomes.

Innovation, team culture, 247–249
Institutional means, team culture, 248
Institutionalizing new approaches, 33
Internal focus, pair programming, 225

Interruptions, daily Scrum meeting, 210
Interviewing. See Immersive interviewing.

James, Michael, 113
Jansen, Dan, 225
Junior-level people, interviewing, 402–403

Kerth, Norman, 202
Kessler, Robert, 129
Kotter, John, 30
Kotter’s model for enlisting support for Scrum, 30

Larsen, Diana, 198, 200–202
Late status quo, stage of change, 15–16

Laws of software development
Brooks’ law (adding manpower to late projects), 45, 233, 398–399
Conway’s law (organizational structure in the code), xxi
Humphrey’s law (gathering user requirements), xxi
Ziv’s law (predictability), xx–xxi

Layout, daily Scrum meeting, 209–210

Learning organizations, 35

Legacy systems. See also Sustained engineering.
daily releases and standups, 180
defect management, 173
goal planning, 180
keys to success, 181–182
retooling, 182
retrofitting, 182
stakeholder meetings, 180–181
a story, 175–177
strangler applications, 182
tribal knowledge, 176

Legal agreements. See Contracts.

Maintaining
old code. See Legacy systems; Sustained engineering.
the release plan, 151–152
Management support for team consultants, 48
Managers, interviewing, 404
Managing people, role of the ScrumMaster, 113
Martin, Robert, 126
Master list. See Product backlog; Sprint backlog.
McConnell, Steve, 45, 357, 388

Meetings. See also Planning.
chairs. See Standing versus sitting.
daily. See Daily Scrum meetings.
standing versus sitting, 197, 214
a story, 1–6
team consultants, 46–47
types of, 431–434. See also specific meetings.

Menlo, Extreme Interviewing technique, 401
Merton, Robert K., 246–251
Merton's strain theory, team culture, 246–251
Merton's topology of deviant behavior, 246–251
Micro-pairing, pair programming, 224, 227–230, 231
Microsoft, 124
Miller, Ade, 128
MMF (minimal marketable feature) set, 308
MMR (minimal marketable release), 347
Multipliers, estimating team velocity, 64–65
Multitasking, negative effects of, 374
Myers, Ware, 45
Nass, Clifford, 374
New status quo, stage of change, 17
Nielsen, Dave, 354–355
Noise reduction, pair programming, 128
Nontechical people, interviewing, 404
Nonverbal communication, daily Scrum meetings, 221
Norming, stage of team development, 235–237
North Carolina State University, 124

Offshoring. See Outsourcing; Team members, adding.
Old code
maintaining. See Legacy systems; Sustained engineering;
refactoring; 13, 125–126
Openness, Scrum value, 8
Ophira, Eyal, 374
Osborn, Alex F., 96
Outcomes, aligning incentives with. See Aligning incentives with outcomes.
Outsourcing, keys to success
agile teams, 332
allocating the work, 333
continuous integration, 335
contraindications, 336–337
daily standups, 333–334
hiring north/south versus east/west, 333
maintaining the Scrum framework, 333–334
paired programming, 334–335
project management, 335–336
real-time communication, 335
retrospectives, 334
sprint reviews, 334
team building, 332–333
travel requirements, 335–336
work packages, 330, 333, 335
Outsourcing, a story, 325–328. See also Team members, adding.
Outsourcing, true costs
cultural challenges, 329–330, 332
development practices, 330
estimating budgets, 330–332
geographic distance, 332
group cohesion, 329–330
increased overhead, 329
long-term retention, 329
project management, 329–330
transition costs, 328–329
working across time zones, 332
Overloading team consultants, 49

Pacing. See Sustainable pace.
Pair churn, 226–227
Pair cycle time, 226
Pair programming
beginner's mind, 225–226, 230–231
benefits of, 128–129, 373
bug reduction, 128
in collaboration, 373
definition, 12–13
design concept cards, 227
distractions, 225, 230
external focus, 225
integrating new team members, 234
internal focus, 225
keys to success, 230–231
micro-pairing, 227–231
noise reduction, 128
outsourcing, 334–335
pair churn, 226–227
pair cycle time, 226
Ping-Pong pattern, 227–228
pair programming, a story, 223–225
in TDD, 128–129
Pair Programming Ping-Pong Pattern, 227–228
Parking unresolvable disagreements, 347–348
Patience
enlisting support of people, 34
implementing Scrum, 17–18
Patterns, determining, 298–299
Patton, Jeff, 285
Payment options, contractual agreement, 360
People, enlisting support of. See also Management; Teams.
communicating a vision, 31–32
consolidating improvements, 33
creating a vision, 31
creating short-term wins, 33
empowering participants, 32–33
establishing a sense of urgency, 30–31
forming a guiding coalition, 31
institutionalizing new approaches, 33
People, enlisting support of, continued
keys to success, 33–34
Kotter's eight-step model, 30
patience, 34
providing information, 34
sponsors, 31
a story, 23–29
Performing, stage of team development, 235–237
Personas (user types), identifying, 359
Personnel. See Management; People; Teams.
Physical environment, retrospective meetings, 197–198
Ping-Pong pattern, pair programming, 227–228
Planning. See also Estimating; Meetings; Scheduling.
goals for legacy systems, 180
list of features and functions. See Product backlog; Sprint backlog.
prioritizing and estimating product backlog, 346
releases. See Release planning.
retrospective meetings, 196–198
Scrum versus traditional methods, 9–11
a story, 1–6
for team consultant downtime, 49
Planning meetings
description, 431–432
team consultants, 47
Planning Poker, 371–372. See also Task Poker.
Planning poker technique, estimating project cost, 307
Points-to-hours approximation, 59
Political environment, estimating team velocity, 57
Potentially shippable code
implementing Scrum, 13
a story, 277–281. See also Delivering working software.
PowerPoint slides
a story, 184–186
template for, 187–188
Practice and integration, stage of change, 16–17
Precisely wrong versus roughly right, 307
Preconditions for sprints, 295–296
Preplanning, prioritizing and estimating product backlog, 346
Principles of class design, 126
Prioritizing
by business value and risk, 429–430
contractual agreement, 362–363
defect management, 171–172
issues in retrospective meetings, 194–195, 199–200
items for release planning, 155
product backlog. See Product backlog, prioritizing and estimating.
project portfolios, 414–416
risks, delivering working software, 283
user stories, 308
Problem resolution, role of the ScrumMaster, 113
Product backlog. See also Sprint backlog.
definition, 429–430
estimating team velocity, 58
prioritizing and estimating, 429–430
Product backlog, prioritizing and estimating
The Big Wall technique, 342–346
customer view, 343–346
evaluating the team, 342–343
focusing discussion, 347–348
keys to success, 346–348
meeting supplies, 348
MMR (minimum marketable release), 347
parking unresolvable disagreements, 347–348
preplanning, 346
setting time limits, 347
shifting estimates, 348
stakeholder view, 343–346
a story, 339–341
Product owner role
canceling the sprint, 259–260
combining with other roles, 75–77
definition, 428
estimating team velocity, 57
responsibilities, 73
risk management, 421, 423
Progress reporting. See Daily Scrum meetings; Retrospective meetings; Sprint review meetings; Value, optimizing and measuring.
Project contracts, 360–361
Project management
duties mapped to roles, 74–75
successful outsourcing, 335–336
ture costs of outsourcing, 329–330
Project portfolios, prioritizing, 414–416
Projects
anarchic, 14
complex, 14
complicated, 14
cost estimation. See Estimating project cost.
duration, sprint length, 85–86
ranking complexity, 14
simple, 14
size and complexity, estimating team velocity, 57
technology and requirements, 14
Promiscuous pairing, 225–227
Provost, Peter, 224, 227–228
Punctuality, daily Scrum meeting, 209
Putnam, Lawrence, 45

Quality. See Value.
Questions, daily Scrum meetings
fourth question, 217–221, 432
keys to success, 220–221
standard three questions, 432
a story, 217–220
Questions, sprint retrospective meetings,
433–434
Quiz for determining sprint length, 88–90
Rambling, in daily Scrum meetings, 210–211
Range, Estimate, Focus, Learn, Effort, Communication, Team (REFLECT), 393–394
Ranges and changes model for contracts. See Contracts, ranges and changes model.
Ranges in estimates. See Story points.
Rants, retrospective meetings, 194
Rate-limiting paths. See Critical paths.
Rating the sprint, retrospective meetings, 200
Real data, estimating team velocity, 61–64
Rebellion, team culture, 247–249
Refactoring old code, 13, 125–126
Reference stories, 303
REFLECT (Range, Estimate, Focus, Learn, Effort, Communication, Team), 393–394
Relative estimates
in cost estimation, 307–308
Fibonacci sequence, 59, 303
Release planning
contractual agreement, 360
degree of confidence, 148–151
delivering working software, 155–156
determining the end game, 153–154
estimating project costs, 309–310
inputs, 147–148
keys to success, 154–155
maintaining the plan, 151–152
outcomes, 153–154
a preliminary release plan, 147–148
prioritizing work items, 155
project cost, 152–153
refining estimates, 155
Scrum planning, 155–156
a story, 143–146
updating the plan, 155
Removing impediments, role of the ScrumMaster, 113

Report
progress. See Daily Scrum meetings; Retrospective meetings; Sprint review meetings;
Value, optimizing and measuring.
team performance, role of the ScrumMaster, 113
Resolving problems, role of the ScrumMaster, 113
Respect, Scrum value, 8
Retreatism, team culture, 247–249
Retrofitting legacy systems, 182
Retrospective meetings
attendance, 198
basic principles, 201
benefits of, 196–197
"Buy a Feature" game, 199
communication, 197
data collection, 198–199
description, 433–434
due diligence, 196–197
ground rules, 198
importance of, 200–201
keys to success, 200–201
physical environment, 197–198
planning, 197–198
prioritizing issues, 194–195, 199–200
purpose of, 200–202
rants, 194
rating the sprint, 200
role of the ScrumMaster, 198–199
running, 198–200
scheduling, 201–202
standard two questions, 433–434
standing versus sitting, 197
a story, 193–196
successful outsourcing, 334
team consultants, 47
timing, 197
Review meetings. See Sprint review meetings.
Rework, delivering working software, 285–286
Rhythm, daily Scrum meeting, 209–210
Risk management
adding team members, 239
core team, 423–424
customer risk, 421, 423
keys to success, 424–425
prioritizing, 283, 429–430
product owner, 421, 423
by role, 422
ScrumMaster, 423
social risk, 423
a story, 419–420
technical risk, 423–424
typical software project risks, 420–421
Ritualism, team culture, 247–249
ROI cutoff, 363
Roles
  choosing, 74–75
  descriptions, 428–429. See also specific roles.
  key competencies, 74–75
  keys to success, 78–79
  mapped to project manager duties, 74–75
  mixing, 75–78
  a story, 69–72
Rothman, Johanna, 171
Roughly right versus precisely wrong, 307
Satir, Virginia, 15
Satir’s Stages of Change, 15–17
Scenarios. See Stories.
Scheduling. See also Done, defining.
  daily Scrum meeting, 208–209
  retrospective meetings, 201–202
  undone work, 101
Schwaber, Ken, 7, 23, 92, 272, 431
Screening candidates. See Immersive interviewing, candidate screening.
Scrum
  artifacts, types of, 429–431. See also specific artifacts.
  definition, 6–7
  evaluating your need for, 13–14
  getting started. See Implementing Scrum.
  planning, 155–156. See also Release planning.
Scrum Emergency Procedures, 257
Scrum framework, successful outsourcing, 333–334
Scrum meetings, types of, 431–434. See also specific meetings.
Scrum roles. See Roles.
Scrum values
  commitment, 8
  courage, 8
  focus, 8
  openness, 8
  respect, 8
ScrumMaster
  combining with other roles, 75–77
  definition, 428
  responsibilities, 73
  in retrospective meetings, 198–199
  risk management, 423
  rotating among team members, 79
ScrumMaster, as full-time job
  breaking up fights, 113
  day-to-day tasks, 112–114
  driving organizational change, 115
  educating the organization, 115
  employee costs, 109–112
  facilitating team activities, 114
  helping out, 114
  impact on the team, 106–112
  key functions, 104
  managing people, 113
  removing impediments, 113
  reporting team performance, 113–114
  resolving problems, 113
  servant leadership, 114
  a story, 103–106
Senior-level people, interviewing, 402–403
Sense of urgency, enlisting support for Scrum, 30–31
Servant leadership, role of the ScrumMaster, 114
Shippable code. See Potentially shippable code.
Shore, James, 129
Shortening sprints, 377–378
Short-term wins, enlisting support for Scrum, 33
Simple projects, technology and requirements, 14
Size
  core teams, 45–46
  team consultant pools, 45–46
  user stories, 301–305, 307–308
Skills and competencies
  core teams, 42–43
  focusing interviews on competencies, 405
  immersive interviewing, 400, 405–406
  key competencies for roles, 74–75
  team consultants, 42–43
  testing competencies in new team members, 234, 237–238
Slides
  a story, 184–186
  template for, 187–188
Sliger, Michele, 372
Social deviance, team culture, 246
Social risk, 423
Software development. See Projects.
SOLID class design principles, 126
Sorting issues, definition of done, 98–100
Spikes, 293–294
Sponsors, enlisting support for Scrum, 31
Sprint backlog, 430–431. See also Product backlog.
Sprint length
  choosing, 84–85, 88–90
  company culture, 86
  criteria for, 84–85
  customer group, 86–87
  decomposing tasks, 87
  in excess of one month, 92
  extending, 92
guidelines for, 88–90
keys to success, 91–92
product owner environment, 86–87
project duration, 85–86
quiz for determining, 88–90
Scrum team, 87
shortening, a story, 370
stakeholder group, 86–87
a story, 81–84
two weeks, a story, 370
warning signs, 90
Sprint retrospective meetings. See Retrospective meetings.
Sprint review meetings. See also Daily Scrum meetings.
description, 433
documenting decisions, 189–190
duration, 187
encouraging participants, 190
keys to success, 188–190
overview, 186–187
planning, 189
preparing for, 187–188
running, 188
stories, customer acceptance, 190
a story, 183–186
successful outsourcing, 334
team consultants, 47
Sprint review meetings, PowerPoint slides
a story, 184–186
template for, 187–188
Sprints
canceling, 259–260
cost. See Estimating project cost.
preconditions for, 295–296
rating during retrospective meetings, 200
reducing scope, 258–259
removing impediments, 258
shortening, 377–378
two-week, 377–378
Stability versus volatility, documentation, 322
Stacey, Ralph, 14
Stakeholders
educating, 298
meetings, legacy systems, 180–181
prioritizing and estimating product backlog, 343–346
sprint length, 86–87
Standing versus sitting
daily Scrum meeting, 214
retrospective meetings, 197
Standup meetings. See Daily Scrum meetings.
Sterling, Chris, 13

Stories
collaboration, estimating tasks, 367–371
contracts, 349–353
core hours, 135–138
core teams, 35–39
creating and estimating contractual agreement, 359
daily Scrum meetings, 205–208
decomposing. See Decomposing stories.
decomposing tasks. See Decomposing tasks.
defect management, 169–170
defining done, 93–95
definition, 160, 292
delivering working software, 277–281
documentation, 313–316
documenting procedures, team options, 255–257
gaining support of people, 23–29
Stability versus volatility, documentation, 322
tasking versus sitting
daily Scrum meeting, 214
retrospective meetings, 197
Sterling, Chris, 13

Index

Stories, estimating project cost, continued
conversations, 307
creating, 307–308
prioritizing, 308
sizing, 301–305, 307–308
team velocity, 308–309
three Cs, 307
Storming, stage of team development, 235–237
Story points
advantages of, 387
data collection, 391
data-based improvements, 391–393
estimates becoming commitments, 387
estimates in ranges, 385–386, 388–391
keys to success, 391–393
REFLECT (Range, Estimate, Focus, Learn, Effort,
Communication, Team), 393–394
relation to hours, 393
a story, 383–386
Strain theory, team culture, 246–251
Strangler applications, legacy systems, 182
Sustainable pace
burnedown charts, 273–274
burnout, 269–275
cycle time, 272
definition, 12
efficiency versus effectiveness, 274–275
hitting the wall, 267–269
increasing team time, 274
keys to success, 274–275
monitoring progress, 273–274
shortening iterations, 272
a story, 265–269
Sustained engineering. See also Legacy systems.
daily releases and standups, 180
goal planning, 180
keys to success, 181–182
retrofitting legacy code, 182
stakeholder meetings, 180–181
a story, 175–177
strangler applications, 182
tribal knowledge, 176
Sustained engineering models
data gathered over time, 179
dedicated team, 179–182
dedicated time, 178
Sutherland, Jeff
burnedown, 273, 431
contractual deliverables, 361
estimating team velocity, 57
on legacy code, 181
contracts, 358
Scrum description, 7
Scrum Emergency Procedures, 257
termination clauses, 363
Tabaka, Jean, 114
Task boards
in collaboration, 378–380
a story, 370
Task Poker
common mistakes, 380
versus Planning Poker, 371
a story, 369–370
for task estimation, 380
team-level benefits, 380
Task Poker, keys to success
averaging task estimates, 381
hearing every voice, 380
investment in the outcome, 381
shared understanding, 381
task estimation, 380
task granularity estimates, 381
teamwork, 382
Task switching, 374
Tasks, decomposing
estimating task sizes, 164–167
example, 164–167
granularity, 167
sprint length, 87
a story, 157–159
Tasks, definition, 160
Tasks, estimating. See also Task Poker.
ATL (active task limit), 373–377
in collaboration. See Collaboration, estimating
tasks.
granularity, 381
open items, limiting, 373–377
pair programming, 373
relative sizing and time estimation, 372
shortening sprints, 377–378
a story, 367–371
task boards, 378–380
task switching, 374
two-week sprints, 377–378
WIP (work in progress), limiting, 374–377
work items, limiting, 373–377
Taxes on team performance, 292–293
TDD (Test-Driven Development)
acceptance tests, 129–131
automated integration, 129–131
benefit in teams, 124–125
benefits of, 133
building into the product backlog, 132
code smells, 125–126
continuous integration, 126–128
definition, 13
definition of done, 132
education in, 132
getting started, 132
implementing, 124–125
improving existing code, 125–126
key practices, 123
keys to success, 131–133
limitations of, 131–132
pair programming, 128–129
principles of class design, 126
refactoring, 125–126
a story, 119–123
team buy in, 132
team status, 127–128
test automation pyramid, 129
training and coaching, 132–133
Team consultants
accountability, 47–48
building your team, 42–47
versus core teams, 43–44, 46, 49. See also Core
teams.
establishing a pool, 40–42
keys to success, 47–49
management support, 48
meetings, 46–47
optimal pool size, 45–46
overloading, 49
overview, 39–40
planning for downtime, 49
skills and competencies, 42–43
small-scale experiments, 48
a story, 35–39
time management, 37–39
transition plans, 40–41
Team members
bus factor, 214
combining with other roles, 75–77
expendability, 214
rotating the ScrumMaster role, 79
Team members, adding. See also Outsourcing.
Brooks’ law (adding manpower to late projects), 45, 233
considering team culture, 238
developmental stages, 235–237
drop in velocity, 238
forming, 235–237
group cohesion, 329
integrating new members, 234, 237–238
keys to success, 238–239
norming, 235–237
pair programming, 234
performing, 235–237
risks, 239
storming, 235–237
a story, 233–235
testing competencies, 234, 237–238
Team velocity
contractual agreement, 360
definition, 51
estimating. See Estimating team velocity.
estimating project cost, 308–309
penalty for adding team members, 238
a story, 51–56
Teams. See also Collaboration; Core teams;
People.
auxiliary. See Team consultants.
building, successful outsourcing, 332–333
buy in to TDD, 132
capacity, estimating team velocity, 59–60
colocated, 138–140
dedicated. See Core teams.
definition, 428–429
distributed, 140–141
long-term retention, true costs of outsourcing,
329–330
newness, estimating team velocity, 57
optimal size, 35
part-time, 141–142
prioritizing and estimating product backlog,
342–343
reporting performance, role of the ScrumMaster,
113–114
sprint length, 87
status reporting, 127–128
taxes on performance, 292
work schedules. See Core hours.
Teamwork, daily Scrum meeting, 214–215
Technical debt, 294–295
Technical risk, 423–424
Test first. See TDD (Test-Driven Development).
Test-Driven Development (TDD). See TDD
(Test-Driven Development).
Testing. See also TDD (Test-Driven Development).
automation pyramid, TDD, 129
competencies of new team members, 234,
237–238
frequent, effects on defects, 171
Themes
developing, 162–163, 167
definition, 160
Three C’s of user stories, 307
Time frame for implementing Scrum, 18
time limits, prioritizing and estimating product
backlog, 347
Time management
  relative sizing and time estimation, 372
team consultants, 37–39
Time zones, true costs of outsourcing, 332
Timeline, contractual agreement, 359–360
Timing
  contractual agreement, 356–358
  retrospective meetings, 197
Traditional contracts. See Contracts, traditional model.
Training and coaching. See Educating.
Transition plans
  team consultants, 40–41
  true costs of outsourcing, 328–329
Transparency, 292–294
Travel requirements, successful outsourcing, 335–336
Trends, determining, 298–299
Tribal knowledge, 176
Truncated data collection, estimating team velocity, 64–65
Trust factor in contracts, 363
Tuckman, Bruce, 235–238
Two-week sprints, in collaboration, 377–378
Ullman, Ellen, 317
Undone work, rescheduling, 101
User stories. See Stories.
User types (personas), identifying, 359
Vagueness, daily Scrum meeting, 212
Validation, delivering working software, 283–284
Value, optimizing and measuring
defect management, 295
determining trends and patterns, 298–299
educating stakeholders, 298
feature work, 292–294
keys to success, 297–299
preconditions, 295–296
presenting data, 296–297
spikes, 293–294
stories, definition, 292
a story, 289–291
structuring data, 296
taxes on team performance, 292
technical debt, 294–295
transparency, 292–294
Values, Scrum
  commitment, 8
courage, 8
focus, 8
implementing Scrum, 7–8
openness, 8
respect, 8
Valve Software, hiring practices, 404–405, 406
Velocity, See Team velocity.
Vision, enlisting support for Scrum, 31
Wagner, Anthony D., 374
Wait and see (real data) method, estimating team velocity, 61–64
Wall, hitting, 267–269
Wheelwright, Steven, 374
Williams, Laurie, 128, 129, 223
Wilson, Brad, 227
Wilson, Peter, 227
Window of opportunity, delivering working software, 283
WIP (work in progress), limiting during task estimation, 374–377
Work items, limiting in collaboration, 373–377
Work packages, 330, 333, 335
Workload estimation. See Burndown.
XP (Extreme Programming)
  implementing Scrum, 12–13
  practices required for Scrum, 12–13
Ziv’s law (predicting software development), xx–xxi