

How this Acorn Grew Development Capacity by Almost 30%

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A Rally Customer Experience Report



The people at Acorn Systems, a highly successful, Houston-based enterprise software company, know a lot about business agility and optimizing corporate performance. After all, their corporate

performance management solutions are used by many of the world's leading companies such as Citigroup, Charles Schwab and Supervalve to confidently measure, optimize and predict costs, net operating profits, EVA, capacity and resources by customer, supplier, product and even down to the transaction. Organizations striving to understand and improve profitability, supply chain efficiencies, cost allocation and cost reduction rely on Acorn for accurate, dynamic cost/profit analytics and metrics that are easy to maintain and highly scalable.

It's no surprise then, that when it comes to running their own business, Acorn Systems apply the same principals of real-time, accurate information to deliver the most appropriate functionality and highest quality products and services to their customers.

Reassessing How Software Gets Done

Acorn Systems has grown to where it now manages a highly distributed software development organization spread between Houston, Austin and the Ukraine in Eastern Europe. Like most software development organizations, Acorn felt pulled in too many directions due to conflicting priorities and an inadequate understanding of the real intent behind each feature request. Compounding this problem was an increasingly complex software configuration environment coupled with the desire to deliver high-priority features earlier, all while staying ahead of rapid changes in their technology landscape.

Acorn's traditional product development process was simply not suited to the new way in which they needed to develop products. Specific challenges included:

- Rather than cramming requirements gathering into a quarterly 3 hour session, the increasing complexity of managing Acorn's offerings and expanding customer base required more regular and ongoing collaboration among the company's stakeholders.
- A widening gap between feature implementation and test case completion resulted in regression testing adding up to 2-3 months per release cycle.
- The increasing number of supported technology platforms and dependent technologies was making stabilization an ever more complex and lengthy exercise.

In short, Acorn was spending less time on the real value-add process of defining and adding new features and capabilities to their products and an increasing amount of time on non-value add testing and release management activities.

"The key questions every development organization needs to answer are 'Where are we today? When will we be done? And how will we know when we're done?'"

It was clear that with our existing process and tools we were simply not able to answer these questions with any degree of confidence."

Torsten Weirich, *EVP Product Development*



Company and Industry

- Privately held Houston-based software company
- Successful developer of Corporate Performance Management Software

Development Environment

- Distributed development team in Houston, Austin and the Ukraine
- Fast-growing customer-base and highly competitive market
- Cross-platform development J2EE and .NET

Challenges

- Testing taking 2-3 months per release
- Conflicting product priorities and requirements
- Complex and lengthy stabilization process
- Disparate requirements, test case, defect tracking and program management tools

Solution

- Adopted Rally's on-demand software lifecycle management platform
- Trained and equipped 25 developers across 3 locations in 2 months
- Eliminated the need for 4 out of 5 existing software lifecycle management tools

Results

- Testing & packaging time reduced from 50% to 20% of program duration
- Increased development capacity by 30% or \$35,000 per month
- Effectively increased capacity by 3 full-time developers
- Reduced release planning effort from days to hours

Scaling Software Agility

Adding to the challenges was the disconnected array of tools used to manage product development. Feature requests were first captured using a CRM system and then elaborated and documented using Microsoft Word and a WIKI-based web portal. Defect tracking was performed using two separate tools, Extraview and an open source tool called Project Locker. Automated testing was managed using Test Complete, while program management and release planning were managed using Microsoft Project and Microsoft Excel with a custom WIKI-based web portal providing team collaboration and communication.

“They key questions any development organization needs to answer are Where are we today? When will we be done? And how will we know when we’re done?” states Torsten Weirich, EVP Product Development at Acorn Systems. “Using five different tools without any integration, it was taking us days to assemble this information by which time it was inaccurate or out of date. It was clear that with our existing process and tools we were simply not able to answer these questions with any degree of confidence.”

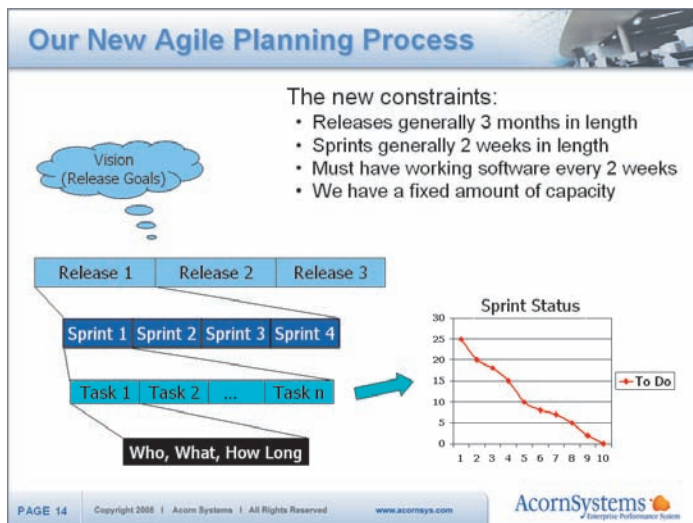
Going Agile With Rally

Torsten realized that Acorn needed to adopt a better, more agile way of developing products that would reverse the trend of spending less and less time on value-add development activities. Many of the solutions Acorn evaluated were either “heavy on process” or were tied to specific development platforms such as J2EE or .NET and not suited to the light process and heterogeneous environment with which Acorn delivers its products.

Acorn's Challenges

- **Lack of consensus**
 - Products pulled in too many directions
 - Priorities in too many directions (everything can't be critical)
 - Feature requests are too general
- **Market agility**
 - Changing market conditions requires adaptive enhancement
- **Big products means quality becomes expensive with traditional approaches**
- **Lack of visibility into what's coming**
 - Gap between request and delivery (easy to forget what was asked for)
 - Knowledge transfer crammed into 3 hours each quarter (information overload, powerful features can only be covered at a high level)
- **Limited understanding of product definition or enhancement process**
 - Stakeholders not clear on how to participate in process
 - Not sure what development needs or how to identify requirements

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Enterprise Performance System



In August of 2005, with a major new release pending, the management team at Acorn turned to Rally Software Development to help them adopt a new way of building products. Rally introduced Acorn to Agile Development, a proven approach to software development that executes multiple development activities in parallel in order to deliver high-impact software in smaller batches on quarterly or monthly cycles. Acorn immediately saw the advantages of the Agile approach and how its practices were embodied in Rally and its products.

Acorn initially decided to pilot the new agile process and Rally’s on-demand solution for managing Agile development on new Acorn products, and continue with their major end-of-year release using the existing process. But in less than two months Acorn became convinced that this was the right solution and made the decision to move all of their development over to

the Rally environment. It took Acorn’s development team less than 2 weeks to transfer their artifacts into the Rally environment and get 25 developers, spread across Acorn’s three locations, up and running. Torsten put it this way:

“We switched everything over to Rally when our current release ran into problems and jeopardized the end-of-the-year deadline, which was not moveable. While changing horses in mid-stream had risks, the bigger risk was staying the course. We changed how we were planning our release and managing our development work. Rally really helped our team understand what we needed to get done by the end of the year and how we would do it.”

Using Rally's on-demand agile software lifecycle management solution, Acorn now has access to a single environment for software Program and Project Management that smoothly integrates the management of the software lifecycle for requirements, test and defects. All these functions operate seamlessly with Acorn's existing coding and automated testing tools minimizing the impact on the organization. With Rally, Acorn is now able to:

- Simplify software project management across the development life cycle
- Synchronize distributed teams and adopt Lean Requirements practices
- Integrate test management and defect tracking into real-time dashboards



Increasing Development Capacity By 30%

Acorn's development projects are now run entirely with Rally's agile software lifecycle management environment, eliminating the need for all other tools except for Salesforce.com and their Test Complete automation tool. Acorn is now in a "continuous development" mode with fully tested iterations every two weeks and quarterly releases to customers. Testing and packaging time has dropped from 50% of the total effort to 15%-20%.

"Rally is your one-stop-shop for succeeding with Agile development."

Skip Angel
CTO, VP Development
Integrated Services, Inc

"By our calculations, these savings have effectively increased our developer capacity by almost 30% which equates to around \$35,000 per month. It's like gaining an additional 3 full-time developers."

Torsten Weirich

Beyond Development

These hard results speak for themselves, but there are also significant intangible benefits resulting from the adoption of Rally's solution. "This has been well received by everyone at Acorn and our morale and confidence within development is at an all-time high," claims Torsten. Riding the wave of this success, Acorn now plans to employ the same processes and tools across their consulting organization so that Acorn's consultants can manage application customization projects with the same degree of agility and success.

"We now have precise numbers on which we can commit and our release planning now takes less than a day. We could not have achieved this without Rally's support and technology."

Rally is the best product I've seen for effective management of the development process, bar none."

Torsten Weirich

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Scaling Software Agility