

Lulu Significantly Improves its Development Process by Switching from Post-Its® to Rally

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A Rally Customer Experience Report



Lulu.com is the premier marketplace for digital content on the Internet, with over 380,000 recently published titles created by people in 80 different countries. With 1.3 million registered members, Lulu is changing the world of publishing by enabling content creators to publish work themselves with complete editorial and copyright control.

By providing storefronts and other marketing support, Lulu enables creators of original content to profit from their work.

Overview

In the software development environment at Lulu, four to six teams work independently, but also need to collaborate with one another on a day-to-day basis. With everyone on the team, including product managers, project managers, and core developers, following Agile practices since 2006, Lulu clearly understood the productivity benefits of Agile development. However, its method of using whiteboards and Post-Its to plan and track its Agile development efforts was experiencing growing pains, resulting in lost productivity and an inability to report progress to higher-level management.

Company Challenges

Prior to implementing Agile and Rally, the Lulu development team had no central system for planning releases or backlogs and no way to give others visibility into the development process. Their previous system of “management through Post-Its” is a common process, and even a best practice, for small, co-located Agile teams. But as the team grew to 25 people, Post-Its quickly reached the upper limits of their effectiveness. Lulu’s whiteboard and Post-Its system resulted in: no historical reference or lessons learned from iteration to iteration, an inability to easily load-balance across the team, and no way of reporting their progress to other departments or to upper management.

Whiteboards and Post-Its simply weren’t scalable. To make matters worse, the problem of managing large amounts of data on Post-It notes grew in direct proportion to the team’s growth. Soon, the team was drowning in a sea of Post-Its.

“At one point, I wanted to show the company’s president our development progress and accomplishments at-a-glance,” explained Chris Anderson, Development Manager at Lulu. “It was incredibly hard to do through paper-based tools.”

Lulu needed an Agile lifecycle management tool that would allow the team to quickly view individual and team status. All of this would lead to improved efficiencies and a humming development team.

Choosing the Right Agile Tool

Once the Lulu team realized they needed a tool to support their Agile processes, they tried to cobble together some of the open source tools they were already using for bug tracking. However, they quickly found that these tools weren’t any more scalable than the previous solution and didn’t reinforce their Agile processes.



Company and Industry

- Industry: Web Services
- A digital marketplace and ISV (Independent Software Vendor), publishing 380,000 new titles since its inception, with almost 1.3 million registered users

Development Environment

- Development is primary focus of company and teams include software engineers, project managers, and product managers
- Teams of four to six work both independently and collaborate together
- Two week iterations and new software releases every 6 weeks

Challenges

- Paper-based Post-It system didn’t allow visibility into the development lifecycle for key executives
- Difficult to manage process for tracking and managing various release projects

Solution

- Implemented Rally’s product lifecycle management solution, providing complete end-to-end product lifecycle visibility from feature request to release for executive and development teams
- Engaged Rally coaches to educate teams on Rally and Agile best practices

Results

- Eight releases in one year, including 2 major releases of the new Lulu Studio™ application, a web-based platform
- Easy installation with 100% adoption of Rally’s Enterprise solution in approximately 4 weeks
- Significant improvement in project management teams’ efficiency and productivity

Scaling Software Agility®



“One of the open source tools we tried only offered one system of hierarchy, but we needed to break it down further so stories could be represented with n-level hierarchies and tasks could then be directly associated with a story,” said Chris.

It was clear that Lulu needed an enterprise-grade Agile solution.

After “evaluating everything under the sun,” the Lulu team found that only Rally addressed the kind of flexibility that a larger-scale Agile operation needed. In addition, Lulu was impressed by Rally’s extensive end-to-end services organization, including on-site coaching.

“During my first week at Lulu, Jean Tabaka, an Agile Coach with Rally, came to Lulu to conduct a retrospective about our first three months of Scrum utilization. As she talked, I had an epiphany of sorts, having come from a traditional PMI background,” noted Chris. “When Agile is ideally operating, it empowers teams and individuals to accomplish dramatic results with the least amount of unnecessary churn.”

The Solution: Agile Lifecycle Management Solutions from Rally

Now, every morning when all four Agile teams meet for their daily scrums, they display the Rally iteration status dashboard on a large interactive SMARTBoard, instead of relying on various dispersed Post-Its. Teams can easily have a conversation about what was completed yesterday, what will be done today and what is in their way. And, with Rally’s simple in-line editing tools, tasks can easily be added to or deleted from a given user story.

By using the Rally tool on-the-fly, development teams can look at everything - from old stories to new iterations - and ensure they don’t over-commit for add-on projects, features, or functionality.

“The Rally tool gives us complete visibility in one place, and it keeps teams accountable,” says Chris. “Post-Its can easily get moved or get lost. With Rally, even if the data is somewhere else, we can still get it. We can pull every bit of data that is in there.”

“One negative effect of moving away from Post-Its was the loss of general visibility of our teams’ task boards and burndown charts,” reflects Chris. “But, by utilizing the robust Rally Web Services API, we now display the burndown charts on a homegrown status dashboard, which we project onto a big screen in the development team area of our office.”

In addition, the Rally tool also offers Lulu long-term flexibility since it can scale and grow as the development organization grows. Lulu has nearly doubled in size since implementing Rally.

Participating in Rally’s User Community

Lulu consistently accesses Agile Commons, Rally’s online community that enables Rally’s customers to ask questions, request new features, and report and track bugs. Through this collaborative community and Rally’s support organization, Lulu has found ongoing customer support that has well exceeded their expectations.

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Chris Anderson
Development Manager
Lulu



“Rally continues to prove that they support their customers with a passion rarely seen by other companies,” notes Chris.

Since implementing Rally, Lulu has completed eight major releases in the last year, all of which were non-bug fixes. The eight releases included two major releases of the new Lulu Studio™ application, a web-based platform that enables users to create photobooks and calendars, using both their own personal photos as well as licensed content from partners such as Getty Images and Collegiate Images.

“It was important to me to have a tool that enables the processes to be dictated by what’s right for the business, rather than the tool forcing the organization to comply with certain processes. Rally definitely gives us that flexibility,” explains Chris.

About Rally

Rally is the leader in Agile application lifecycle management (ALM) dedicated to making leaner development organizations that respond faster to changing customer needs. According to a study by QSM Associates, teams that rely on Rally’s Agile lifecycle management products and services are 50% faster to market and 25% more productive than industry averages. Rally’s products were honored with four consecutive Jolt Awards (the software industry’s equivalent of the Oscar® award) in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009. The company’s end-to-end solutions for Agile development also include Agile University, the largest source for Agile training, and Agile Commons, the largest collaborative Web 2.0 community dedicated to advancing software agility.

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