



Overview

Launched in September 2006, Sermo is already the largest online physician community in the US, with nearly 70,000 physician members. On Sermo's web site, physicians can exchange knowledge with each other and gain potentially life-saving insights directly from their colleagues. Sermo harnesses the power of collective wisdom and enables physicians to discuss new clinical findings, report unusual events, and work together to improve

patient care. Through its unique business model, Sermo is free to physicians and has no advertising or promotion.

Company Challenges

With delayed releases and little predictability in the development process, Sermo's Senior Vice President of Engineering, Tim Peacock, and the rest of the executive team at Sermo decided to overhaul the company's development practices from waterfall methodology to Agile. When Rob Sherman, Engineering Program Manager, arrived in January of 2008, the process of moving to Agile had already begun, although it wasn't consistently implemented across the company.

"We were blending a bunch of different Agile practices, including Scrum. We had some surface features that looked 'Scrum-y' but we really weren't, especially as priorities kept changing mid-iteration," said Rob. He further explained, "In addition, people were tracking their work through wikis where they made a table, inserted a list of tasks, and then manually updated everything to attempt to show their progress. It was a time-consuming and frustrating process."

Sermo began evaluating Agile-specific solutions in an effort to reinforce Agile practices and simplify tracking and managing development efforts. An added push to move towards some type of Agile tool was fueled by Sermo's development team in Minsk, Belarus, since the time zone differences only further added to the complications of tracking development progress across the organization.

Searching for an Agile Solution

The search for an Agile tool began with Sermo getting free trials of Rally and two other tool vendors. The evaluation quickly came down to a head-to-head comparison of Rally and another tool provider. In an effort to compare the two, Rob executed a number of day-to-day tasks, such as importing user stories, using both Rally's interface and the alternative tool vendor's interface.

"I tried to import user stories with the other guys numerous times and I just couldn't get it to work. The first time I tried the same thing with Rally, it worked flawlessly and took under five minutes. That, along with Rally's strong feature set, made the decision for us and we decided to use Rally for a pilot project," Rob noted.

Once the pilot project was deemed a success, implementation of Rally across the company went fairly quickly because the team didn't require any user support or in-depth training. After screenshots were shared with the team, along with instructions on how to login, Sermo's development team began using Rally.



Company and Industry

- Industry: Technology
- Largest online physician community in the US, with nearly 70,000 physician members

Development Environment

- Mac shop that develops primarily in Java and Ruby on Rails
- Six development teams dispersed globally between Minsk, Belarus and Cambridge, MA
- Run on two-week iterations with two to three iterations for each release; ship every release

Challenges

- Delayed releases with little predictability in software release dates
- Tracking through homegrown wikis made it difficult for the organization to understand development progress
- No reinforcement of Agile practices across the company

Solution

- Implemented Rally's Agile lifecycle management solutions, providing end-to-end visibility on development progress and releases across the organization
- Rally solution provides reinforcement of Agile best principles across the company

Results

- Time-to-market is three times faster with Rally and Agile

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Feeling the Rhythm

Fast forward to six months after the initial purchase and the entire development team is using Rally, including the offshore team in Belarus. The team has definitely begun to feel the effects of improved productivity and enhanced visibility on all development projects. From engineers using Rally for defect tracking and logging tasks to executives accessing Rally to review burn down charts, use of Rally has become pervasive at Sermo.

Teams at Sermo use the iteration status dashboard in Rally during their daily stand-up meetings and conduct iteration and release planning in Rally's planning screens with easy-to-use drag and drop functionality. Prior to Rally, the team's workload was balanced in multiple spreadsheets and in wikis; now the workload is balanced in Rally. And, the teams are well-trained on using Rally to quickly identify roadblocks.

"We use Rally to track everything – when designs are approved, when the work is executed, and what type of feedback we receive from our users. Product managers use Rally for planning and to prioritize our backlog. In the backlog, we have user stories that then link to attachments to provide a bit more detail about each user story. Rally organizes our work really well and gives everyone a place to hang their hats," says Rob.

Rob further explains, "We've done 13 releases in six months since we implemented Rally. Without Rally, we maybe would have done half that number. We are dramatically more efficient."

In addition to having success with the Rally solution, the development team members access Agile Commons, Rally's online user community, for updates on Agile development and to share tips on how to best use the Rally solution. The team also continues to find new ways to use Rally. They are currently investigating bug tracking tools and evaluating linking the bug tracking information into Rally using Rally's Web Services API.

Rob says, "Rally lets me sleep at night. I'm very sensitive about helping people balance their time and facilitating the best work life for team, and Rally lets us do that. When people arrive every day, they always know what they need to do. There is no mystery. People are committed to using Rally because it makes their life easier."

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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