

SKINKERSSM communication you can't miss!

Skinkers information broadcast technology is the world's first enterprise class, multi channel message and content delivery technology. The company's Live Notification Platform delivers

"ShouldKnow" information directly to the most appropriate device (computer, handheld, mobile phone) via the most appropriate channel, enabling organizations to deliver priority notifications and distribute heavy content through a controlled, highly versatile and secure universal communication platform. Skinkers is headquartered in London with offices in Milan, New York and Sydney.

Overview

Since Skinkers was founded in 2001, its expansion has been incredibly rapid. Today, many of the world's largest corporations use Skinkers technology, including American Airlines, London Stock Exchange, Virgin Atlantic and xbox 360. Employees, customers and business partners rely on Skinkers to receive the information they ShouldKnow, at the right time, through the right channel, to the right device.

Company Challenges

When Skinkers began development on a new product, all-too-typical communication challenges plagued the company. Internal development teams were overflowing with great ideas about what the product should do and how much it should scale. Weeks of discussions and brainstorming resulted in big functional and technical requirements documents, but no real customer input. With lots of detailed documentation and no tangible product to show for it, the team was unable to solicit feedback from the business and the customer.

"It was clear that engineering didn't understand the business, and the business didn't understand engineering in terms of detail and process modeling necessary to build a unified product," said Alistair Ball (called Ali), Skinkers' Head of Engineering.

It was also clearly time for a process overhaul.

The Solution: Scrum

After being caught in the usual loop of writing requirements documents, the team chose to abandon its waterfall processes and adopt Scrum practices. As the newly appointed VP of engineering, Ali took on as product owner, and launched a completely customer-focused product team.

The team immediately threw out all of the previous documentation and started developing in four weekly sprints. The engineers started by writing user stories, coded for one month and then invited the entire business to a demo of the product. Much to the team's surprise, employees showed up en masse to see the latest work. The live demo was met with an enthusiastic response and created an environment where the business and customers could provide instant feedback on product functionality. The engineering team felt productive and appreciated.

As time went by, Skinkers introduced pair programming to solve new technology problems, and the team prioritized their work within fixed resources and time. By the end of a small number of Sprints, Skinkers had a product that was ready to deploy.



Company and Industry

- Rapidly-expanding, privately funded technology company and the market leader in information broadcast technology for the enterprise

Development Environment

- Headquartered in London with offices in Milan, New York and Sydney
- High-profile customers including many of the world's largest corporations -American Airlines, London Stock Exchange, Virgin Atlantic and xbox 360

Challenges

- Lots of detailed documentation but no tangible product to show the customer for feedback
- Communication breakdown between the business and engineering
- Lack of visibility, collaboration and accountability within the team

Solution

- Threw out documentation and started developing in four weekly sprints
- Adopted Rally's Agile lifecycle management solution after a successful 30-day trial
- Identified and trained a ScrumMaster and gained additional Agile knowledge from Rally

Results

- 200% improvement in development process efficiency
- Customer alignment from direct input on product functionality
- Enthusiastic and engaged engineering team and employee base

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Finding the Right Tool

Two factors drove the need for Skinkers to search for an Agile project management tool early in its Agile adoption. First, the team didn't have a dedicated project manager on staff and didn't want to hire one into the rapidly evolving team. Instead, they needed something that encouraged engineers to effectively manage themselves, and a lightweight Agile project management tool seemed like a natural solution. Second, in order to be successful as a self-managing team, both engineers and management needed complete transparency across the software development lifecycle. Engineers needed to be able to hold each other accountable for completed work, and management needed to be able to accurately gauge progress and communicate it to employees and customers.

Ali also introduced QA at the Sprint Planning sessions so they could identify at an early stage how the story was going to be marked as completed, and now, only QA can mark a developer's code as complete before Ali accepts the task and stories as Product Owner. All defects are tracked using Rally, and those that are not able to be rectified in the current Sprint are put into the backlog and prioritized.

In addition to evaluating Rally's solutions, Skinkers also looked at open source tools, but it was Rally's outstanding customer support that ultimately won over the team. "Support from Rally has been exemplary, even when we were just trialing the product," says Ali. "The Rally team did everything possible to make sure the tool did what it needed to do – they were responsive and looked after our users."

"We've seen such great results that we haven't actually quantified our improvement, but my guess is that we have gotten a 200% improvement from adopting Agile and Rally compared to the way we were working before."

**Alistair Ball,
Head of Engineering, Skinkers**

Visibility and Accountability Using Rally

The Skinkers team has found that the most valuable aspect of the Rally product was the ability to visually track progress with burn-down charts and other real-time reporting. The team prints off the burn-down chart for the current iteration and makes the necessary course corrections based on their progress. The Skinkers team even took its internal accountability one step further by enforcing a rule that the daily stand-up meeting can't begin until everyone updates their status in Rally.

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Alistair Ball

"We love that Rally fits the methodology perfectly," said Ali. "We've seen such great results that we haven't actually quantified our improvement, but my guess is that we have gotten a 200% improvement from adopting Agile and Rally compared to the way we were working before."

Ali attributes much of the team's success to adopting Agile practices in general, but he has also seen a tremendous increase in productivity and customer alignment specifically related to using the Rally tool.

"Rally was so intuitive and aligned with Agile practices," says Ali. "We put more thought and detail into Rally than we would have with stickies, and Rally gives us complete and real-time visibility and accountability across the team."



Adoption Across the Enterprise

After seeing the success of Skinkers development team for the messaging platform, the peer-to-peer team is now adopting Agile and Rally, and Skinkers management has adopted Scrum practices as a framework to deal with fast changing developments.

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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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