Publishing in an Agile World

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A WebWorks.com White Paper.

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Overview

This paper will discuss the Agile methodology used in software development and its impact on the publication of related product documentation. The paper concludes with a brief overview of how the WebWorks ePublisher three-stage "factory" concept can help streamline the publication process and aid Agile development..

How Does Going Agile Impact Content Development?

In the last several years the concept of Agile development techniques has rapidly taken hold in the software industry. The core concept of Agile development is the use of an iterative and incremental approach to design where new requirements are constantly scrutinized with a view to shipping new product as quickly and as efficiently as possible. Technology is changing fast and new software products need to be flexible to meet new market demands.

The most common Agile methodology uses the idea of a scrum, or a small team, composed of a "Scrum Master," several engineers and at least one person charged with producing documentation. The team members work in short bursts, known as sprints, at the end of which they deliver both a new piece of functionality based on a limited set of high-priority requirementsand any associated documentation.

With daily meetings and short sprints to deliver product, the Agile scrum environment can be a tough one, and brings with it a new set of challenges for developing and delivering content.

As well as employing the software Agile development process, some companies have also applied the Agile process to the content development itself. In such cases most, but not all, companies have made the move to a structured authoring environment designed for reuse and repurposing content for single sourcing. This sort of topic-centric approach to content development works well in an Agile environment as each relatively small chunk of information within a topic can be developed in parallel with the relevant code design and testing.

Some Agile practitioners argue for a minimalist approach where there is just enough documentation to enable basic use of the product. The argument is that users are flexible and will work around small gaps, and that a "just good enough" approach is sufficient.

Both the minimalist and the topic-based approach have their positives and their negatives, and the choice seems to be driven by the general philosophy and consensus of the particular Agile team itself.

One of the biggest challenges in an Agile project is not knowing at the start of the project how many sprints, or iterations, a project will take to complete. For this reason the content development process should be a key part of the process from the start to ensure that the total level of effort required is captured.

Content developers working alongside Subject Matter Experts in such a close ongoing development environment also need a way to enable effective communication of both ideas and review.

In a well-planned and executed Agile environment the documentation will grow and evolve in parallel with the product feature set.

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Agile Publishing with WebWorks ePublisher

One of the biggest questions about publishing in an Agile development environment is how to keep the deliverables to the customer up-to-date / current if the product is constantly evolving.

At WebWorks.com we believe the answer is to separate the content development from the publishing process. Capture and author the content in the editing tools you are used to using. Ideally, use tools that support a structured content model. But use a different tool or platform to do the actual publishing. That way you don't have to re-author format-specific setup each time the content changes during the development cycle.

We call this a "factory" approach, where you set up a publishing production line with separate staging events that can be easily switched out to meet new needs, with clearly defined pipelines connecting them. That way new content can easily be "poured" into one end of the production line and the desired output(s) quickly produced, reviewed and tested with minimal to zero impact on overall production time. The production line can then be used to do quick one-off on-demand publishing runs, or to do a large-scale pre-scheduled final production build as required.

You can publish frequently, as and when you need to.

Using WebWorks ePublisher the process is broken down into three distinct stages on the production line.

1. **DESIGN** the output. Using ePublisher Pro you can very quickly design how you want the end deliverable format (or formats) to look even before you have content. Just set up the styles or structure tags you are going to use, import these into ePublisher Pro and apply the business and presentation rules you want. You can even set up a different look and feel for different delivery formats. If a new format is suddenly required to meet a customer need it can be added in just seconds with a few clicks of the mouse.

2. **CAPTURE** the design by saving the ePublisher Project as Stationery (our "super template on steroids.") The standalone Stationery file can then be saved out to a network drive or stored in a content management system for use by anyone who needs to publish content to the designated formats. Saving the project out to Stationery also frees up the designers using ePublisher Pro to keep fine- tuning the project deliverables during the sprint process. Any changes made can be quickly applied to the Stationery and it will automatically sync to the updated version the next time it is run.

3. **APPLY** the publishing process. Using ePublisher Express anyone can quickly and easily publish a piece of content against the pre-configured output design stored in the Stationery. Just select the document, the Stationery file needed, and the output format(s) and click "Generate." It's that simple. You can generate new deliverables in just seconds. Or automate the process for regular overnight builds using ePublisher AutoMap.

Many of our customers who work in an Agile development environment use ePublisher's ability to output to wiki formats during the sprint-driven content development phase. This allows them to deliver the content to a central wiki where the Agile team can review and comment easily without needing access to specialized editing tools. Once the project nears a final build stage they can use the same Stationery to output to the final delivery format(s) needed, such as an embedded help system, online help, PDF, print or even a mobile device.

About ePublisher

ePublisher is a multiple component product that enables cost-effective processes for efficiently writing, presenting, and deploying online and print publications. Through the use of its three components, organizations can leverage existing authoring tools and content management systems and meet organization-wide publishing needs without incurring expensive training or software deployment initiatives. Its open system architecture, based on industry-standard XSL, enables a large degree of flexibility, customizability, and migration investment protection.

ePublisher will save your group time and seamlessly fit into your writing workflow, giving your writers more time to do what they do best - write.

About WebWorks.com

WebWorks.com, a brand of Quadralay Corporation, is the leading provider of comprehensive online publishing and help system delivery solutions. Its products and services constitute the definitive single source for all your ePublishing needs. We specialize in content conversion software that outputs Web, online help, wiki, and electronic publication formats. Our ePublisher Platform can automate the conversion of source documents in popular authoring formats such as DITA-XML, FrameMaker or Word and convert them to multiple end-user formats such as WebWorks Help, HTML, CHM, and PDF. Our conversion system is based on XSL so that output formats can be customized or even developed from scratch..

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