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Is Your Editorial Team Ready to Embrace Agile? Here's What You Need to Know

Danielle Padula¹

¹Head of Marketing and Community Development, Scholastica

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Danielle Padula
Head of Marketing
and Community
Development,
Scholastica

Have you been hearing advice along the lines of the need for journal teams to become more “agile” to keep up with the fast-changing scholarly publishing landscape, and are you wondering what that means exactly and how to put it into practice?

There’s no denying that “agile” has become a project management buzzword in recent years and a bit of a catchall phrase in the process, making it less than straightforward to unpack. For most, Webster’s definition of agility—“able to move quickly and easily”—and synonyms like “nimble” and “lithe” are the first word associations that come to mind, and that’s not far off the mark. But does becoming agile mean you

and fellow editors will be able to dive into desk chairs and finish the work on your plates at hyper speed? Not quite—though it’s an entertaining mental image!

A common misconception about “agile project management” is that it’s about everyone working faster. Instead, the fundamental aim of agile is to achieve results more quickly by breaking up large-scale initiatives into smaller projects that can be completed or “shipped” individually. In doing so, teams can also theoretically progress towards their goals more easily.

In this article, I’m overviewing what agile project management is, when it’s applicable to journal planning and when it’s *not*, and implementation examples. To get a more in-depth look at ways journals are becoming agile, check out Scholastica's white paper, [“How scholarly publishers can use Agile methodologies to respond to change more effectively.”](#) You can also watch this [2020 ISMTE North America Virtual Event session](#) on agile project management for editorial teams presented by Scholastica Cofounder and CEO Brian Cody and J&J Editorial Editorial Client and Systems Support Project Manager Lindsey Struckmeyer.

First, What Is Agile exactly?

The concept of agile project management [originated](#) in the world of software development in the early 2000s as an alternative to the then-dominant “waterfall” methodology to enable developers to get products to end-users faster with

opportunities to pivot plans as needed. In contrast to the waterfall project management approach, wherein teams map out entire software applications from soup to nuts and then code them to completion, the agile methodology involves incremental software planning and execution. In agile development, teams build versions or pieces of products, test them, iterate as needed, and then decide what to build next. Agile teams work in “sprints” of time (usually two weeks) and use the start of each sprint to assess their progress and identify improvement opportunities.

Among the key benefits of agile project management for software teams are being able to:

- Deliver value to users more quickly, rather than having to wait for entire applications to be complete;
- Address new internal and external needs during iterative project planning (*i.e.*, changing data privacy requirements); and
- Avoid the sunk-cost fallacy by abandoning projects that aren't yielding desired results before investing extensive resources.

In recent years, other industries—[from farm equipment manufacturing to radio programming](#)—have begun borrowing agile project management principles to break up long-term initiatives into more achievable chunks with room to change course as needed. With the world of academic publishing evolving more rapidly as journals transition to digital-first products, agile is becoming increasingly applicable to editorial and publishing teams as well.

It's important to note that the original “[Agile Manifesto](#)” for software development contains 12 guiding principles—some more transferable to a wide range of industries than others, so the idea of “borrowing” concepts of agile is the operative term here.

Adopting Elements of Agile in Scholarly Publishing

So how can your journal team begin leveraging agile principles in project planning? Perhaps the best place to start is knowing when agile will *not* apply to you.

If you're planning an initiative that requires mapping out multiple dependencies upfront (*i.e.*, step A must account for steps B and C), then know that the waterfall approach will likely better fit your needs. Remember, agile is about breaking up projects into components you can complete and start benefiting from right away. So if you're trying to be “agile” but find that you have to get through multiple related

projects before you can experience the fruits of your labor, that should raise a red flag that you're probably falling into waterfall territory.

Other tenets of agile to keep in mind are the importance of building projects around motivated individuals who are on the same page about iteratively developing initiatives and open to making adjustments and questioning assumptions. If unknowns create tension among your team, you may struggle to embrace agile. Agile processes should also include time for progress updates and reflection to identify improvement opportunities (*i.e.*, sprints). And they should “promote sustainable development,” as stated in the [Agile Manifesto](#), meaning you should be able to iterate towards your larger goal at a steady pace indefinitely until you reach it.

Examples of projects where journals teams can implement agile principles include:

- **Editorial process updates:** If your team runs regular journal audits, you likely come away with improvement goals each time, such as wanting to make initial manuscript decisions faster. Of course, that goal consists of different components. For example, among other things, your time to first manuscript decision will depend on the time it takes to complete technical checks, make editor assignments, and secure reviewers. To progress toward your goal sooner, rather than taking a waterfall approach and trying to determine every aspect of your process you'll need to change, in the spirit of agile, you can start by focusing on just one, such as decreasing technical check steps. Complete or “ship” discrete technical check improvements, reflect on the level of difference that makes, and then decide if/how you can make another set of changes to tighten up your decision time further. This will also make it easier to tell when updates are working and when they aren't since you'll be introducing and assessing changes independently.
- **Journal development:** While publishers have traditionally mapped out journal plans, including content/workflow systems and profit and loss statements years in advance, today, with the rapid introduction of new digital standards and open access (OA) initiatives, that's becoming more difficult. Consequently, some publishers are beginning to experiment with agile when launching titles or updating existing ones, and it's an area where editorial teams can help. For example, when MIT Press decided to [launch](#) *Rapid Reviews: COVID-19*, the first OA overlay journal for peer reviews of coronavirus preprints, they knew it would require experimentation, so they opted to take an agile approach. The publishing and editorial team members worked closely together to iteratively develop new methods for identifying, triaging, and reviewing relevant preprints. Another area where publishers are employing agile

is piloting OA business models, such as [an initiative from The Electrochemical Society](#). Here too, editorial teams are stepping in to provide data and on-the-ground knowledge about which approaches work best for their team and authors, such as reporting on the uptake of article processing charge-based OA options.

- **Journal promotion initiatives:** Finally, another area where journals can adopt agile principles is promotion planning. When considering ways to raise awareness of your journal content, your team might be tempted to take stock of multiple promotion channels, such as all your social media profiles, and create a list of steps you can take to share more updates from each. But in doing so, there's a good chance you'll start to feel a bit overwhelmed, leading to questions like: *Who's going to have the time for all of this extra content posting? How should the work be allocated? Is this even worth doing? Maybe we should table it till our next meeting?* See where I'm going here? Whereas, if you work towards your larger goal by identifying discrete steps you can take towards it, such as posting four article previews on Twitter each month to start and deciding on next steps from there, you'll be able to move the needle faster and with less stress.

Putting It All Together

Ultimately, the aim of agile project management is to complete working components of larger initiatives as you go while having the opportunity to iteratively develop solutions based on internal learnings and changing external factors. Agile project management isn't about working faster but about creating value sooner. Embracing agile principles where applicable can help editorial teams progress towards larger goals that may have previously seemed insurmountable in an incremental way.

Disclosure Statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.