

Podcast transcript - Client Innovation Network

An Introduction to Agile Decision Making Challenging the Status Quo

<p>Claire Marshall - Barrand:</p>	<p>Hello and welcome to this Client Innovation Network podcast. I'm Claire and I'm joined by Uche, Billie and Emily and we work in the Learning & Development teams and K&I teams here at Slaughter and May.</p> <p>Today we are going to discuss 'Agile Decision Making: Challenging the Status Quo'. Managing and implementing effective decision making has never really been more important than it is right now as we all operate in an agile hybrid world.</p> <p>Uche I did some reading around this and there was just so much information out there - can you explain in a nutshell what is agile decision making?</p>
<p>Uche Onukaogu:</p>	<p>Thanks Claire. Well agile decision making in its simplest form is about responding to change when the need arises, it's about being adaptable and adaptability is key here.</p> <p>An agile organisation is one that can change and adapt in this world that we are living in, particularly in the last two years where we've needed to adapt and it's one that is characterised by self-organising teams working collaboratively and that's a word that we are going to talk about quite a bit today.</p> <p>Working collaboratively to come up with solutions and outcomes in a manner that they decide is the most efficient.</p>
<p>Claire Marshall - Barrand:</p>	<p>So, when I was looking into this I was just blown away by the amount of content on how people make decisions. There's a hierarchical, there's dropdown, there's the scrum method. Just so that we are clear when we are talking about the status quo we are imagining here is that typical decision making process that would involve a leader or a manager getting team members or other people to provide information, that manager or group of managers and reviewing the information and then making a decision.</p>
<p>Uche Onukaogu:</p>	<p>That's the status quo and that would be what would be a typical decision making process and there isn't anything wrong with that but what agile decision making allows you to do is work more collaboratively so rather than have this linear process with a leader making the decision ultimately, that leader, for want of a better word, is part of a team that collaborates to come up with the decisions. They are made by people of different levels within the organisation so each of them feed into this process so it requires them working collaboratively but importantly, iteratively and with a great deal of transparency.</p>
<p>Claire Marshall - Barrand:</p>	<p>So really it flips that hierarchical model on its head and there's a really flat structure. What are the other key characteristics of agile decision making?</p>
<p>Uche Onukaogu:</p>	<p>We've talked about it being an iterative process, so within that you break down the deliverables into smaller chunks so that in each stage you are able to reflect, to give feedback and feedback into the</p>

	<p>process and so as you move along each stage it's got feedback from the team that's now, that flat structure that you've talked about, and that ultimately should make for a better product at the end.</p> <p>Now that regular feedback and teams working in that manner doesn't necessarily mean that we are just talking about working more quickly, it means that you allowing the teams to have the freedom to reach these decisions without having the sort of linear process where a decision maker imposes the decision on them.</p>
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	So it's small decisions being made in a collaborative iterative fashion which ultimately leads to the single final decision being made implemented with buy-in, is that right?
Uche Onukaogu:	<p>That's exactly right.</p> <p>It shouldn't be confused with when we talk about agile working which is obviously one of the things that can benefit teams post-pandemic and it doesn't necessarily mean that the teams themselves have free reign even though they are self-organising teams. There are still going to be outcomes and goals [that people need to hit at these definite times within the process.</p>
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	So tell me, what does agile decision making look like in practice?
Uche Onukaogu:	Well in practice it starts from leadership - it's from the top down. Leaders need to create an environment or a culture that allows for this type of methodology that allows the freedom for teams to organise themselves, to feed it back into the process, to come up with decisions by themselves as opposed to how it might have been in a typical decision-making process. They need to give the team the tools and the resources in order to do this so that collaboration, that feedback or smaller deliverables can all be fed into that process.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	And Billie and Emily are going to talk to us about some of the tools that we use here in this process and which might help with anyone who's listening as well.
Uche Onukaogu:	Yes exactly because project management tools generally will be able to assist with that iterative process. It should be outcomes focussed so we mentioned that it's not just a case of self-organising teams having free reign to do anything, there needs to be outcomes and that will be fed into the process so that everyone has buy-in and understands what the end goal is.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	Moving on, this all sounds quite new and quite fresh but when I was looking into this, and there's loads of information out there we should say if anybody is interested in getting to the real nitty gritty which we are not going to have time to cover in this podcast, there's a huge amount of information out there on the internet, I was amazed to see that there is an agile manifesto that has been knocking around for twenty years. This isn't brand new. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

Uche Onukaogu:	You're right, it isn't brand new and the Agile Manifesto is quite a useful reference for people who are looking to work in this way. Now that came about from the software community who designed it having recognised the shortcomings from the design software process. But over the years the manifesto and what it presents has been adapted by other businesses, other organisations and the manifesto itself has twelve principles that people adhere to this sort of methodology stick to with four values, overarching values and so they are easily accessible. You can find this manifesto but to just highlight some of the key ones that might apply to our listeners, one of the principles of this agile manifesto is simplicity. Now just developing enough for your job to get done just enough for that to be done.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	And it's that next stage isn't it, keeping it simple so that you can move it on rather than being kind of stuck within a framework of perfection.
Uche Onukaogu:	Exactly. Now that might make some people uncomfortable to hear, but this iterative process lends itself to just enough until the next stage so that's one of the basic elements of this manifesto but that has been taken on into people who are using agile working so that that iterations follows that method.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	And it's interesting what you say there that it might be difficult as I understand it one of the other principles is actually support, trust and motivation and that's going to be key here isn't it because without that, you are not going to be able to embed that kind of growth mindset, that just good enough let's keep it going.
Uche Onukaogu:	Exactly and that goes back to the question about creating the right culture and the right environment so that there is that trust and collaboration so that big decisions can be made honestly and feedback given honestly as well.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	You've said a few times that collaboration is really important and I want to bring Billie and Emily in here but before we do can you just touch on the benefits of agile decision making. Why should we care, why should we be trying it?
Uche Onukaogu:	Well I mean part of the attraction of this is that it allows greater creativity. Your teams are able to come in at an earlier stage where perhaps they might not have, and so iterative working allows the freedom to innovate where they might not have been able to do so early on in the process before. It also empowers your team and your individuals so that they can make decisions themselves and feed into the process which leads then to buy-in and that showcases talent quite early on and then breaking down the task into smaller deliverables, even though that might sound like a longer process ultimately, results in less waste because along the way, all the relevant people are fed into the process to reach a better outcome in the end.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	It's that idea if you are going to fail, fail fast but fail small.
Uche Onukaogu:	Exactly that.

Claire Marshall - Barrand:	And that's how you can move it forward. I suppose one thing I would be really interested in is the idea of using regular feedback and reflection. Before we come onto what that might look like in practise and we hear terms like "sprint reviews" bandied about here, I would really like to hear from Emily and Billie - how do you think tech and innovation can help support agile decision making?
Emily Lew:	Well tech innovation can definitely play a role here. One type of tech which would be of obvious utility is collaboration tools or collaboration sites like HighQ. We use HighQ at Slaughter and May in conjunction with a lot of our clients who are really familiar with it and often use it internally within their own organisations. HighQ is a collaborative working platform that combines file sharing, project management and team collaboration in one place and we find it really useful for communicating and collaborating when there is a wide range of stakeholders working on the same project. It acts like a single source of truth enabling us to do away with cumbersome manual processes and that can definitely help a team to be more agile because they can make decisions based on up-to-date information.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	That's really interesting what we've said there about using HighQ and the idea that it can be used for feedback seems to be incredibly helpful there. Uche can you may be talk us through a little bit of that.
Uche Onukaogu:	Yes so feedback may have been described somewhere as [sprint.....] reviews and then more widely it's been retrospective and what we are looking at here is just simple steps, you know have you looked at the work that's been done? Do you think that work is acceptable for you, can we say that that work has met the outcomes? Do you need to change anything, do we need to redo anything from this? Does it meet what you'd already set out you said you were going to do? Does that work with that? So you take that approach and then you can do the same thing when you are looking at reviewing or giving feedback in an agile way. So you consider then: what did we actually do? How did we reach this decision? Does it match what we said we were going to do at the end of it and do we need to feed into this process at any point? Do we need to then reflect on what we've done? So those are the sorts of things that we look at when we think about sprint review.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	So actually the tool like HighQ there would be fantastic for that being able to go in and review it, compare it to the previous version, are we still in line and move it forward again. There are obviously loads of great project management practises that we see but are there other tools specifically designed for project management and this review process that we could use Billie?
Billie Moore	Yes absolutely we do use other project management tools such as Jira which is quite a well-known tool across many industries and also Juralio which is a little bit more niche and legal specific and they assist us with our decision making. Using project management tools such as these allow you to clearly see who is working on what, you can break complicated projects down into phases and tasks which you can then allocate to specific individuals or teams and that really helps with transparency and tracking progress on the work phases.

Claire Marshall - Barrant:	<p>So it's clear that we've got tools that can really help us and good project management practises where you break everything down into small tasks, where you review, where you look backwards, you take the right bits forward, you progress towards the end goal, all of that is crucial.</p> <p>What about the hybrid working environment we find ourselves in, I mean it's obvious that communication is essential to agile decision making. If that fails we're going to find the whole process very difficult. Is there any tech that can help us there?</p>
Billie Moore:	<p>Yes so I think like many organisations we use Microsoft Teams at Slaughter and May as our main communication platform but beyond that we are currently piloting a new way of enhancing that hybrid experience using a tool called Laduma and Laduma is an immersive meeting tool which seeks to give equal prominence to both remote participants as well as those in the room. Which allows everyone to participate more equally and fully in contributing to sharing documents, marking up documents, using interactive whiteboards for brainstorming sessions and it really puts everyone on an equal footing so whether you are in the room or at home, you can collaborate better together.</p>
Emily Lew	<p>It will be interesting to see in that pilot whether Laduma does enhance meeting experiences in that way.</p>
Claire Marshall - Barrant	<p>It will be really interesting to see if that helps people to reach decisions together and feel like they're part of the team because that's obviously what's missing when you are in that hybrid working environment.</p>
Claire Marshall - Barrant	<p>Turning away from tech for a minute, Emily is there anything else in the innovation space which can help support these agile working practices?</p>
Emily Lew:	<p>Yes it's easy to think that innovation is all about tech but there's plenty of innovation initiatives that don't involve tech at all. We've developed a methodology that we call Legal Process Design which is a way of improving manual or cumbersome processes which really aren't working any more, and using this methodology we've helped lots of clients to change the status quo and improve the way they work. So one example is that we helped one of our clients in the healthcare sector to improve an internal reporting process that they had. We did that by creating a process map which showed the original process in a visual way, all the different phases and tasks and then we held a workshop with the entire team where we ideated together and come up with ways to improve that process and we refined that process map in various iterations, until eventually we came up with an improved process which was more efficient.</p>
Claire Marshall - Barrant:	<p>I mean that sounds like agile decision making in real life doesn't it where you are kind of ideating, you're collaborating, feeding back, taking different bits forward and seeking to improve it. Billie, have any other clients proactively identified that they need to change the status quo?</p>
Billie Moore:	<p>Yes they have so we also ran a similar exercise for a large telecoms client who had recognised that their teams were not communicating effectively. So as Emily said we held a similar in-person workshop, this time with the three teams involved in that process, to try to</p>

	figure out where the blockers were, what the tension was and how the processes could really be improved and what we could put in place, so that everyone understood more clearly what their roles and responsibilities were.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	And that really helps doesn't it because then you can get the buy-in from those things. Emily do you have any comments to kind of add to that?
Emily Lew:	I think that recognition that things can be changed and improved is so important. People needn't stick to old ways of doing things just because they've always been done that way and that's really I think a good description of what it means to have an agile mindset.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	<p>I think that's right. It's the agile mindset leading into the agile decision making and really helping that pull together, and it's so helpful to hear I think those practical examples of where it can work in quite a simple way. It's not requiring a huge culture shift as it's in some of these more simple processes as we go along, even if the process itself and the improvements they have some complexity to them.</p> <p>It's really helpful I think Uche for us to hear in practice how that works but are there limitations to agile decision making?</p>
Uche Onukaogu:	Yes I think it's good to hear how tech and how we can approach agile decision making and all of those things work. Not everybody will have the tech available to them or have invested in that at this stage and so that might have limitations in terms of the project management approach to it, but there are also concerns about culture and whether you have the right culture embedded in your organisation to respond to agile thinking. If people do not understand the real essence or meaning behind agile decision making and think it's just about changing processes, without really embedding that culture, that might present challenges. Also if you are working in an organisation where you have employees who are used to doing things in a certain way, there may well be resistance to that and when there's resistance there's no buy-in and that makes the whole process fall down.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	<p>So just pulling together those thread that we've seen - we've seen a little how they've worked in practice and we've talked about those. I mean what I think I've heard, and please any of you jump in and tell where this isn't right, you need to identify the right process and not all of these are going to be right and I'm guessing if you are making a decision on who you want to hire you should get some feedback from other people but essentially it's going to boil down to a single person. If you are thinking about what kind of decisions you look at, it's something that lends itself to improvement, it's something that needs a buy-in, it's something that lends itself to a whole team bringing great ideas, and it's that sense isn't it everyone bringing growth, their growth mindset, there's some great work out there around on cognitive diversity and having different views and how that can improve things so that can be really helpful.</p> <p>So finding the right decision, creating a culture of feedback and creativity, using tech to a great advantage can be really helpful, and</p>

	being patient it's not going to be perfect and actually accepting that processes aren't going to be perfect either is important.
Uche Onukaogu:	Yes and accepting that to begin with it's not going to be quick because you're embedding a new way of working. So starting small and recognising that that will take time to feed into the process.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	I think that's great. Emily would you like to wrap up. Is there anything else on the Client Innovation Network that is worth highlighting to our listeners?
Emily Lew:	Just to say I suppose that we have a dedicated Innovation and Legal Tech team so if anybody's interested or would like help with challenges in this space to reach out to one of us or to your usual Slaughter and May contact.
Claire Marshall - Barrand:	Thank you for listening, we hope you found this helpful and interesting and there will be lots more information about the Client Innovation Network on our website or from your normal contact. Thank you.
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