Beyond the 'Scrum': the value of individual work

Imagine walking into an open plan office. In the middle of the room there is an animated meeting of six or seven people. They are clearly working on a project together. Ideas are being energetically shared, a steady stream of suggestions being offered, keyboards are enthusiastically tapped, notes made. There is a buzz of achievement, of a team at work.

Your eyes then pick up a lone figure in the corner of the office. They are staring intently at their computer screen and then typing. They are clearly focused. What do you think at this point?

Working with clients I have repeatedly encountered similar situations where ostentatious team working exists alongside individuals working alone. And every time I experience the same feeling: sympathy for the person working alone. I always feel that the individual is somehow missing out on the group buzz, that their talent is not contributing in the same way to the organisation, that they are less engaged, overlooked by the spectre of bureaucracy. You might have experienced the same thing.

So, why do I have the feeling that someone plainly focused on their work is not quite contributing as much to the organisation as a team? The reason, I believe, is that team working has become the height of managerial fashion. We are told that project teams are the way to get things done. Teams, enhanced by agility methods like Scrum, are the route to corporate agility and agility is what companies need to compete in the fast changing business reality. Teams are good and, as a result, individual work appears diminished.

The team-based approach to agility is a management fashion which is actually rooted in management research. It was the Japanese academics Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi who first made the comparison with the rugby scrum in their 1986 *Harvard Business Review* article, "The new product development game". Later, Jeff Sutherland took up and developed the analogy. It is worth noting that in rugby, the scrum is a battle between the biggest and strongest players on the pitch. From the scrum the ball emerges and is then passed onto the more creative players. Management metaphors only get you so far.

Organisational agility is obviously important. Achieving it requires individual responses as well as group ones. Yet, all the talk and attention today is on teams and Scrum methods. To mix metaphors, they are the silver bullet to organisational agility.

In reality at any one time the majority of employees are likely to be performing individual tasks. The lone figure in the office is not alone. This means that achieving organisational agility requires giving serious consideration to how individual tasks are approached, assessed and configured. In fact, our work with clients suggests that 60 per cent of tasks are performed, and will continue to be better performed, individually in the majority of businesses which don't operate under a project-based business model like engineering services or IT systems integration.

The route to becoming truly agile is to go beyond teams and Scrum, and be able to perform also the individual, routine tasks with more speed in decision-making and execution.

The trouble is that routine tasks tend to be bogged down by rules, regulations, protocols and measurements. While teams roam free, individuals are restricted. Routine tasks tend to be long-standing and are carefully controlled. The traditional control model is preventive and based on authorisation and strict compliance to policies and procedures. Agility and empowerment are in short supply when comes to the bulk of individual tasks. Engagement suffers as well.

A different model is needed to make agility more pervasive when it comes to tasks which are better handled by individuals. Banking provides a good example of the traditional control model at work. Apply for a loan and even if your application is in line with policy and your credit score healthy, the bank employee you are dealing with will need to find an authorised signatory — usually two or three hierarchical levels above the employee — before the loan is agreed.

This appears, at first glance, to be sensible and prudent. But it effectively disempowers the employee, takes longer and creates bureaucracy. The financial group Affinity changed this model and reaped the dividends. It eliminated a long-established lengthy approval process. The replacement was what Affinity describes as its Member, Organisation, Employee (MOE) framework to guide the decision-making process of employees in the branches.

Affinity laid out its new model like this: "No employee will ever get in trouble for doing what is right for the customer… There is only one operating guideline you ever need. Trust your feelings — if it feels right and makes sense do it on behalf of the customer. Do not consider the system capability, policy or procedure — err on doing whatever is necessary for the customer and allow your manager or supervisor to take care of the rest. Finally, be prepared to defend your decision! If your intention is to do what is right for the customer, you have the support of management and your co-workers."

When Affinity employees use their judgement under the MOE framework and deviate from formal policies, they document their rationale for the decision and post it on the company's internal system so that all is transparent. Affinity has innovated its control model, moving from the traditional, bureaucracy-creating "preventive model" to a "detection model". When the rationale for a decision is posted in the intranet, every employee at Affinity as well as the boss can read it if they wish to do so. Transparency has activated a social self-control system.

Affinity has reaped dividends. Charge off rates for higher risk clients plummeted by almost 50 percent (from 1.9 to 1 percent). Moreover, the new control model led to the bottom-up creation of predictable decision-making norms, enabling the organisation's management to reduce the perceived risk of a random decision-empowered employee.

In conclusion, building true organisational agility requires an approach which embraces team, as well as individual tasks. Innovating the control model is key to let employees perform individual tasks with agility. Engagement scores will skyrocket for all, not only for the "elected" Scrum team participants.

<p align="center">♣♣♣</p>

Notes:

- *The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
- *Featured image credit: Aix brainstorming, by jeanbaptisteparis, under a CC-BY-SA-2.0 licence*
- *When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our Comment Policy.*

Alessandro Di Fiore is the Founder and CEO of the European Centre for Strategic Innovation ([ECSI](#)) and ECSI Consulting, based in Boston and Milan. He is a consultant, author and media commentator on strategy and innovation. He has been included in the radar list of Thinkers50. Alessandro has worked in management consulting for more than two decades. Along the way he has advised more than 25 Fortune 500 companies throughout the world on strategy and organisational change. He started his consulting career as a product manager at Gemini Consulting, where he was responsible for life sciences in continental Europe, Managing Director for Italy and global head of its Market Focused Strategy Center of Excellence. In 2000 Alessandro founded his first European boutique strategy firm, Venture Consulting. The firm was sold in 2008 to Tefen, an international management consulting company floated on the Tel Aviv stock exchange. Alessandro went on to found ECSI in 2010 with the aim of creating a truly unique global consulting firm. You can reach him at adifiore@ecsi-consulting.com or follow him on Twitter [@alexdifiore](#).