

***AGLPM3 - Unit 1 - Activity 2: OBSERVE
8th Agile Leadership Skills:
Pursue Simplicity Not Complexity***

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Agile Leadership Behavior Nine: Pursue Simplicity

Simplicity – the art of maximizing the amount of work not done – is essential

Agile Manifesto Principle Ten

The agile approach creates a tendency towards light, targeted use of technology to provide key benefits. It does this in three main ways:

- ◆ By removing marginal features from upcoming development work
- ◆ By eliminating the tendency to add unnecessary design features to a paper BDUF specification
- ◆ By focusing on the immediate concerns of stakeholders.

This immediacy and short-term focus in the agile approach counters the tendency of many to look too far ahead to the ‘next job’ rather than concentrate on current work. In this chapter, we will see how one large, over-complex project was cut down to size by a change to an incremental implementation of a simple solution.

USDA puts its Email on the Cloud

In 2008, USDA employed over 100,000 staff, carrying out a range of functions – from crop insurance to food safety, from agricultural research to animal health. However, there was one common requirement: the need for reliable, consistent, and cost-effective e-mail system and shared calendars.

Each of the 29 bodies under the Department was responsible for organizing their own email systems and computer networks. A classic case of *sub-optimization*. Each network had its own dedicated staff and was managed differently. Necessary data

dissemination was inhibited by the reliance on local email address books that could not be shared. Meetings were difficult to set up, as the calendars of the invitees were often not visible to the meeting organizers unless all the participants worked in the same department.

Across USDA, the average cost of email was approximately \$156 per user per year, over \$15m a year when all costs were added up. Different versions of email software were being used from one unit to another. This caused problems when staff transferred departments. It also introduced the risk that one day a disaster might occur and it might be found that not all the necessary backups had been taken. Or, more likely, even if the backups were available, they would not restore the data properly.ⁱ

Faced with this organization-wide problem, the Department assumed that a large, complicated solution was needed. A single, centrally run *enterprise e-mail system* was planned. Each of the 29 or more existing email systems would be merged into a single enterprise system. Despite the fact that its core competencies were in agriculturally related administrative work, USDA planned to set up and run the *enterprise e-mail system* itself. It planned to employ specialist senior managers and contracted expert technical consultants. It would house the computers in its own premises and be responsible for all the security and disaster recovery procedures.

From the beginning, the federated components of the Department resisted this single *one size fits all* solution. They were used to running their own affairs, and each had 'special' requirements of their own that had to be met before they moved to a new system.

Because capital budgets were tight and the new enterprise e-mail system was going to serve so many customers, storage was going to be tight. Staff members were only going to be offered a small mailbox, and would need to continually delete old messages or use inefficient and complicated archive facilities to store them in case they needed to refer to them in the future. The miserliness of the storage, combined with the problems of conversion also meant that staff would not have access to more than two weeks of previous emails once they started to use the new system. A staff member would have to make a special request to retrieve old emails from their previous system.

The planning for migration to the new enterprise e-mail system grew increasingly complex. The addition of extra storage and processing power had to be synchronized with the switch-over of staff members from their old email systems.ⁱⁱ As work got underway, and more technical difficulties became evident, the USDA Chief Information Officer (CIO) researched the possibility of moving the email services based on *cloud-computing* instead (see page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).

Suppliers had just started to offer cloud-computing email services. These offered more functionality, greater storage, increased reliability, and flexibility. Costs would increase smoothly as new users were added. The *cloud* offered consistent and reliable

recovery if disaster struck. After some research, the CIO decided to take this route rather than continue with the project to build the complex enterprise email system. There was still planning to be done, but now the focus was now on business decisions, not technical decisions.

The move to the cloud computer solution was a great success. It provided mailboxes 25 times the size of the planned enterprise e-mail solution, with easy access to additional capacity if required. Previously unavailable facilities, such as *chat*, *web collaboration*, and *video conferencing* could be added as required.ⁱⁱⁱ

The new system cost only \$96 per user per year – a \$6m per year saving over the previous decentralized email approach. This is a good example of how the incremental agile approach was used outside of its usual narrow focus on software development.^{iv}

Conclusions

We have seen how the USDA overcame barriers to the implementation of a single email system by removing local requirements for unusual features and exceptions. Plans changed from a large, complex design to the purchase of a simple, standard commodity. Stakeholders accepted the new solution because they could see the benefits of its stability and in its use of new technology.

ⁱ {USDA CIO 2011 #373: 3}

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