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Detecting "Agile BS" Revisited

The Department of Defense (DoD) Innovation Board (DIB) coined the term "Agile BS" to highlight a major issue: teams claiming they are "agile" but not delivering the value real agility creates. We applaud the DoD for both their willingness to tackle this critical issue and the undiplomatic title.

To support their work, we developed the following indicators of potential Agile BS after working with 100+ agile teams and seeking feedback from coaches supporting Government programs. While no single item is a perfect indicator, the short list items are a great place to start.

The Short List

☐ Working software is not delivered in many sprints

☐ Business value delivered, stakeholder satisfaction, and software quality are unmeasured or are not improving over time

☐ Real system users are not involved in sprint demonstrations and intra-sprint testing

☐ Testing (e.g., security, integration, UAT) occurs in a different sprint from development

☐ Agile team is larger than 9 people

☐ Sprints are longer than 3 weeks

More Comprehensive Indicators

Scrum is by far the most used method to implement agile values and principles. As a result, many of the items below highlight elements of "bad Scrum".

Product Ownership

☐ Product owner (PO) cannot approve work without first checking with others, or management overrules PO decisions

☐ PO role is filled by a vendor-partner (a.k.a., a contractor)

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☐ PO is part-time and often holds up the Scrum team due to limited availability

☐ PO is not from the business (i.e., the organization that will use what is built)

☐ PO received little or no training specific to the role

☐ PO does not take part in many Scrum events

Scrum Master

☐ Scrum Master (SM) is part-time and often holds up the Scrum team due to limited availability

☐ Impediments stay unresolved for weeks or months

☐ SM has little to no job experience as a scrum master and significant skillset deficits (e.g., facilitation, ability to teach and coach, deep understanding of Scrum)

☐ Same person performs both the SM and PO roles

Leadership

☐ Leaders do not understand and impede key aspects of agility (e.g., not allowing product owners to make binding decisions)

☐ Leaders interrupt sprints with unplanned work

☐ Leaders are unwilling or unable to help resolve impediments outside the team's control

☐ Leaders and key stakeholders expect waterfall artifacts (e.g., detailed project schedule)

☐ Leaders use metrics as weapons rather than as the basis for a conversation about improvement

Procurement and Contracts

☐ "Sprinkles" agile words into the procurement, but does not adhere to key agile values and principles (e.g., mandating 50+ requirements)

☐ Requires deliverables commonly used in traditional, waterfall projects (e.g., detailed up-front requirements documents, detailed MS Project schedule)

☐ Requires a contract modification to change scope

☐ Team members cannot help with some team tasks because of contractual limitations

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☐ Separate contracts for some System Development Life Cycle (SDLC) phases (e.g., requirements, design, development, testing, deployment)

Miscellaneous

☐ Team finishes majority of backlog items in the final few days of each sprint

☐ Team uses a "hybrid" agile methodology

☐ Many team members are part-time

☐ Standard meetings (e.g., Scrum events) are often not held or skipped by team members

☐ User stories are focused on "horizontal slices" (e.g., database, user interface) instead of "vertical slices" of functionality (e.g., an ATM user can retrieve their checking account balance)

☐ Someone other than the development team sizes backlog items (e.g., estimates story points)

☐ Metrics are heavily focused on productivity (i.e., velocity) without balancing measures of business value, quality, and predictability

☐ Backlog items are considered 'done' without approval from the product owner

☐ If a legacy system exists, the developers have never watched real users completing transactions in it

☐ Sprints are 4 weeks or longer

☐ Organization is focused on DevSecOps software tools before the agile team is regularly producing high-quality software