



Extreme Project Management Requires Extremely Simple Tools

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Title:	Extreme Project Management Requires Extremely Simple Tools	
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Abstract:	You may think that agile project tracking is paperless and without bureaucracy. The reality is that many of us become consumed with tools, technology, and ineffective means of communicating status. The beauty of extreme agile project management is simplicity and this article identifies how best to track your project with mind maps and spreadsheets.	
Version:	1.0 (2009-09-24)	Original
	2.0 (2010-08-10)	Updated document and attached spreadsheet
	3.0 (2014-03-01)	Major update and simplification

Backgrounder

In Doug DeCarlo's insightful book *eXtreme Project Management*, [1] he identifies innovative ways to streamline processes and simplify a team's focus. Agile project management, and particularly Scrum, can become overwhelmingly consumed by methodology, jargon, and rules. This is just the opposite of what was originally intended for agile-lead projects.

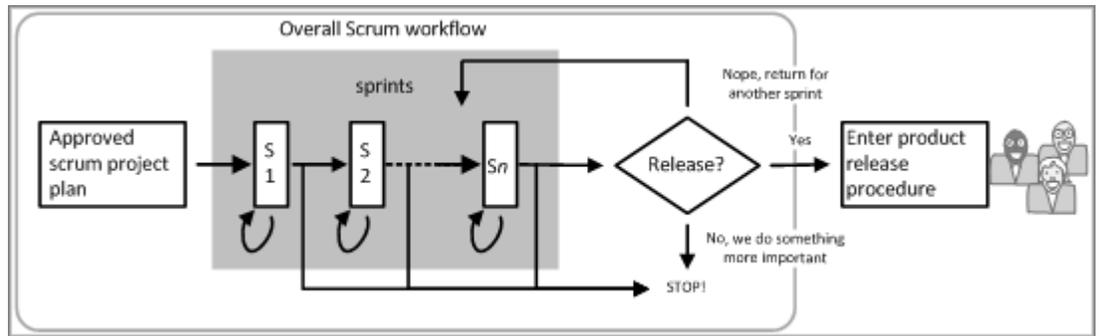
As an agile facilitator and leader includes the following key roles and responsibilities:

- Provide guidance.
- Motivate the team to deliver the project on time.
- Remove obstacles.
- Provide timely, effective communications.

It is the communications part of our role that is so important. Let's take a Scrum project for example.

A Quick Scrum Walkabout

Initially, the scope of a Scrum project is defined by the scrum plan that includes a definition of each of the product backlog items (features). The most important, customer, and high business value items should be prioritized to be implemented first and broken down into tasks in a sprint planning session primarily driven by the product owner. A person with the designated role of ScrumMaster facilitates and guides the team.



The team meets frequently (daily scrums) with the intent to discuss progress, remove impediments in order to reduce risk, and agree on remaining hours of work to complete. At the completion of every sprint cycle, the results of the sprint are presented and discussed in a sprint review meeting involving all stakeholders including the customer. The project should be left in a tested, working state. The team will decide whether to release or to proceed to the next sprint cycle.

Scrum doesn't usually allow new feature requests to be tacked on without removing other yet-to-be-implemented features, so there should be little risk of creeping requirements that impact schedule and cost.

Famous last words ...

With this brief introduction, the ScrumMaster holds the key to lead and facilitate the team requiring effective communication.

Communicating to the Team and Stakeholders

Since the *PMBOK® Guide* [2] refers to communication as being 90% of a project manager's role, the same commitment must should apply for ScrumMasters.

How much communication is enough?

Software managers don't have time to communicate and project managers tend to deluge the team with too much useless information and host way too many meetings. In contrast, agile methodology likes to dictate little to no documentation at all while keeping meetings to a bare minimum. This doesn't mean that there isn't plenty of time in preparation by the ScrumMaster.

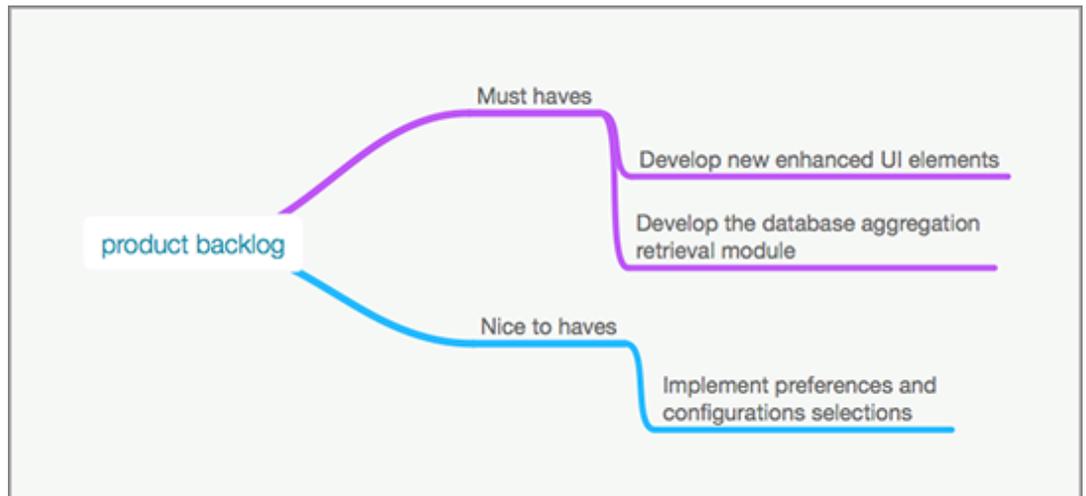
In my humble experience, highly focused and simple communication can go a long way to ensure that everyone is informed and that the team knows exactly what to focus on.

Isn't that the role of communication anyway?

Let's define simple communication tools that can be used for product backlog prioritization and for tracking Scrum project status.

Defining the Product Backlog Items

Before we get into the spreadsheet template, recently I've learned about the power of mind maps in the article written by Claire Moss in *Better Software* magazine. [4] Why fool around with stickies on the wall when you can create and adjust product backlog items with stakeholders by projecting a living mind map drawing on the wall.

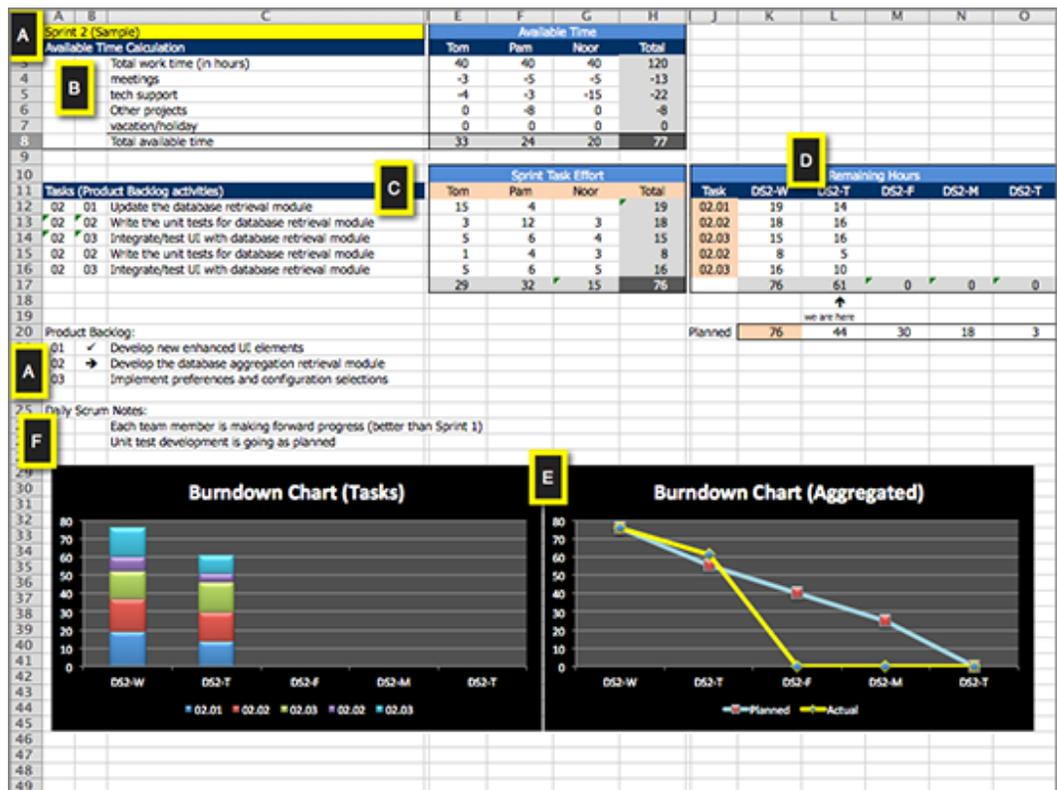


I can't think of a better way to identify the *must haves* from the *nice to haves*. The best part? There are plenty of powerful mind map visualization software apps available for minimal cost (or no cost at all). Not only are mind maps great tool for brainstorming, they serve as digital assets for your project without spending hours transcribing cryptic notes from paper.

Project Status Simplified

To make communications effective, information should be concise, understandable, and actionable. And that's where project management software tools help. When I'm leading multiple agile projects and I need to track effort, costs, dependencies, and the use of shared resources, I resort to LiquidPlanner. [3] I know there are many great tools out there, but this web-based solution has become the Salesforce.com for ScrumMasters and project managers. On the other hand, if you're just working with a single project at a time, a simple spreadsheet can serve as a great communications tool to track key elements of most any project.

I've defined a single spreadsheet worksheet to track status a project sprint. For the sake of simplicity, we'll assume a weekly sprint of five working days.



The project status information is tracked and maintained in individual worksheet tabs and is projected on the wall and updated in real time with the team at daily project team meetings. The worksheet is divided into sections (A through F).

- There are two parts. The top cell identifies in the top cell the sprint number and the lower set of sales show the product backlog items completed, active, and not yet started. This is filled out at sprint planning.
- The project team's available time is summarized during sprint planning for the entire sprint in man hours.
- During sprint planning, the active product backlog items are divided into tasks to be completed. The team members should resort to sprint poker to estimate the hours to complete

the work. Each individual's total hours shouldn't exceed their available hours. Otherwise, the work hasn't been subdivided properly for the available resources.

- D. Every day of the sprint, a new column is filled out summarizing the total remaining hours for each task to complete.
- E. There are two graphs that reflect the daily progress of remaining hours of work to complete. The chart on the left gives a view of each task (the larger colored blocks indicate the most work remaining). The chart on the right shows the aggregated remaining hours planned versus actual. The three remaining days actual values are charted as 0 due to the fact that those days are in the future.
- F. Finally, if there are some special notes to log, enter them here. This is a good place to indicate risks, constraints, or resources that are needing attention.

A Final Word

The easiest thing to do is to simply copy and paste this spreadsheet and send it after your daily project meetings to the team and then perhaps to the extended team and stakeholders after the sprint review. One tip I'd strongly suggest is to highlight which tasks are each team member's highest priority for the day.

Why make project planning and project tracking complicated?

If you'd like a copy of the spreadsheet to use, just contact me at <http://www.leadingswmaniacs.com>.

Bibliography

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3. LiquidPlanner. <http://www.liquidplanner.com>.
4. Moss, Claire. "Feeling Lost in the Woods? Mind Maps Can Help!" *Better Software* magazine, January/February 2014, 26. <http://www.stickyminds.com/sites/default/files/volume-issue/pdf/V16I1.pdf>.

Bio



Ken Whitaker of Leading Software Maniacs® (LSM) has more than twenty-five years of software development executive leadership and training experience in a variety of technology roles and industries. He has led commercial software teams at Software Publishing (remember Harvard Graphics?), Data General, embedded systems software companies, and enterprise software suppliers. Ken is an active PMI® member, Project Management Professional (PMP)® certified, and a Certified ScrumMaster (CSM). Sources for LSM's material come from case studies, personal leadership experience, the PMI *Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*, and Ken's leadership books: *Managing Software Maniacs*, *Principles of Software Development Leadership*, and *I'm Not God, I'm Just a Project Manager*.

Ken is the editor of *Better Software* magazine, and has created PM University™, <http://www.pmuniversity.com>, as a new addition to Leading Software Maniacs online, eLearning curriculum focused on pragmatic project management and software leadership courses. Ken is also the creator of PM Chalkboard®, <http://www.pmchalkboard.com>—the fastest way to learn basic project management principles with entertaining, no cost tutorial videos. Ken also is a frequent guest writer for <http://www.projectmanagement.com> (formerly, <http://www.gantthead.com>).

To help anyone needing to manage digital assets as versioned backups, Ken has developed the Spresso™ project versioning software, <http://www.VersionItWithSpresso.com>, (available for both Windows and OS X).

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