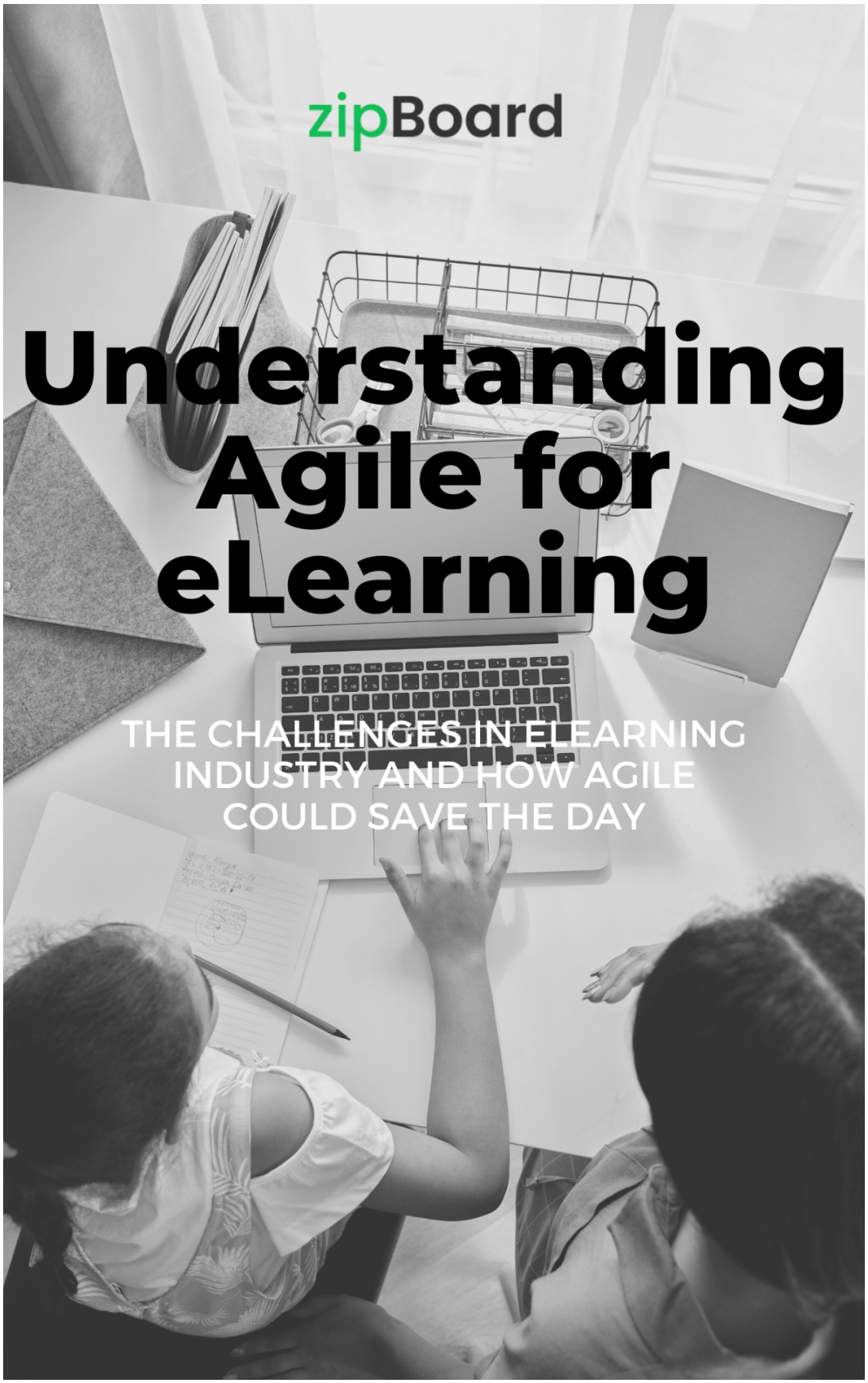
zipBoard
Understanding Agile for eLearning
THE CHALLENGES IN ELEARNING INDUSTRY AND HOW AGILE COULD SAVE THE DAY

Understanding Agile for eLearning

With love, from zipBoard

We at zipBoard always aim to make the process of eLearning course development more efficient and productive. We have helped a lot of L&D professionals to track bugs and give their feedback visually while saving them tons of time (and money).

And now, we cooked a dish that will help you understand Agile in terms of eLearning course development workflow!

And, here is the recipe. ↓

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With love, from zipBoard

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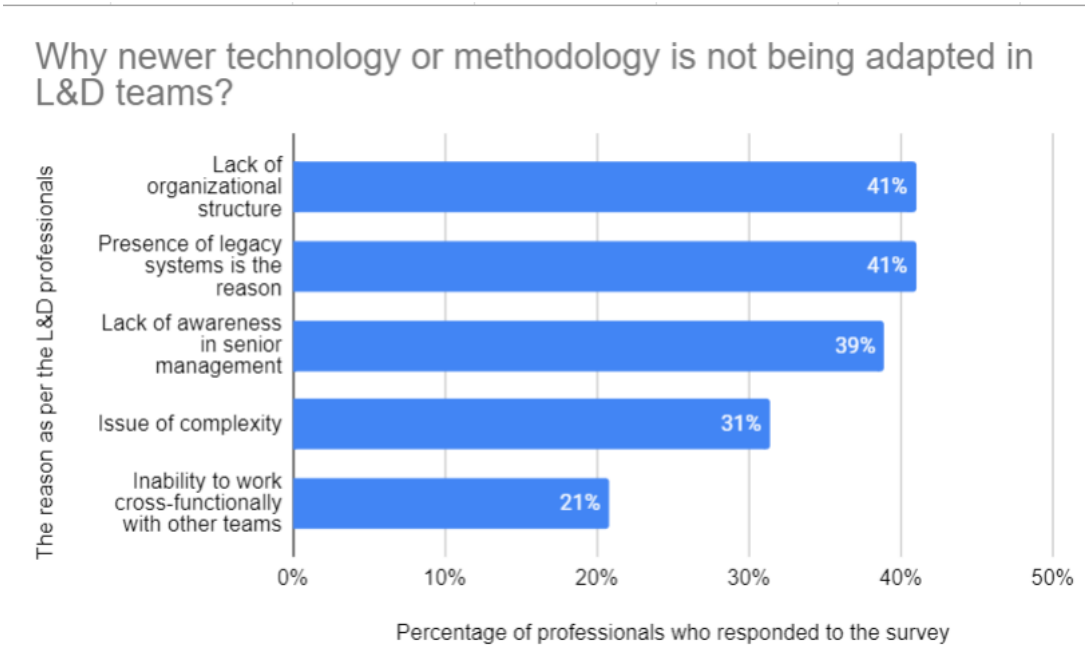
About zipBoard

Introduction

The Learning Guild's research on the effect of the 2020 COVID pandemic on the L&D industry revealed some interesting information. Below are some interesting observations based on the answers of 1162 respondents.

- 41% used new instructional teaching methods which weren't used widely until 2019, like micro-learning, space learning.
- 55% created new courses which weren't "hot" until 2020, like topics based on remote communication
- 38% reported using new content creation technology like chatbots, video content
- 31% adopted newer scaling technology like LMSs, APIs, and analytics

Even though there were massive shifts in the L&D industry, a mere 13% of the respondents' teams adopted newer workflows!



What is even grimmer is the fact that almost a third of the individuals who responded informed that they have been slowed down during the pandemic due to budget cuts, lack of technology, and inability to secure funding. As a result of that, it might get increasingly difficult to hire new professionals, program development, technology implementation, and organizational learning itself.

Now is a better time than any to implement Agile into the eLearning development process which will give the L&D teams an upper hand as compared to their competitors in implementing new technology, creating better courses, minimizing loss, and being adaptable to future conditions.

Principles of Agile

Below are the four core principles of Agile from the Agile Manifesto and some examples that describe the importance of those principles that have revolutionized the way companies make products.

Individuals and interactions over processes and tools

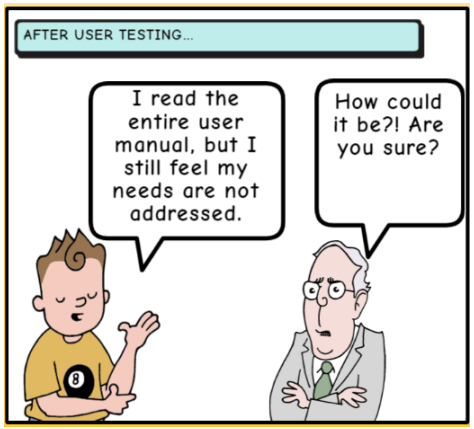
If the developers determine after interacting with the client that some different tools will be better and/or there need to be some changes in the existing developmental process, it should be prioritized.

For example, if your organization has been using tool A for a specific purpose, but now for a new project you feel tool B is more suitable, you should switch. Sticking to an existing process that you know doesn't work anymore just because of legacy effects is not ideal.

Working software over comprehensive documentation

"Software" means a product in general, which is an eLearning course in this case.

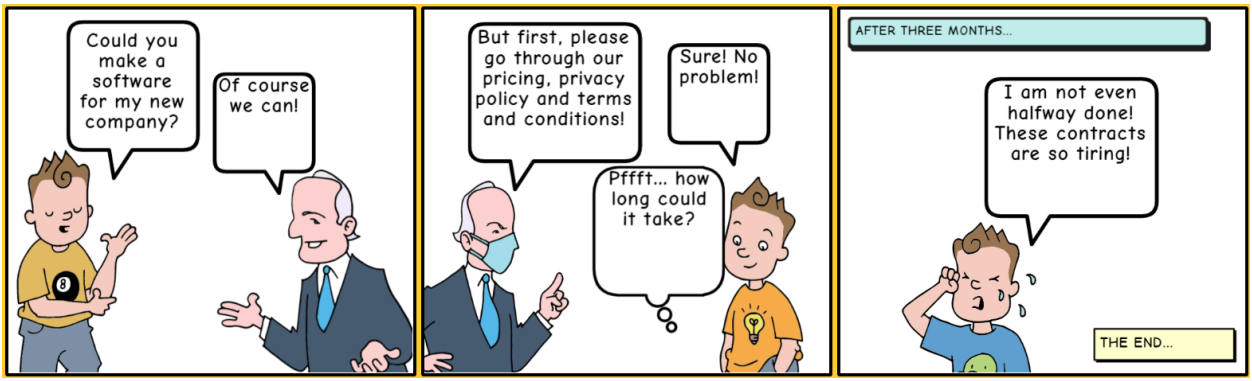
Rather than spending a lot of time creating lengthy and detailed documents which no one really reads, focus on creating something that is of value to the user.



For example, if a user has to put a lot of effort into getting the reward, it is not a good product. More focus should be placed on reducing the barrier of action and make the product easy to use rather than focussing on creating a detailed "how-to" manual.

Customer collaboration over contract negotiation

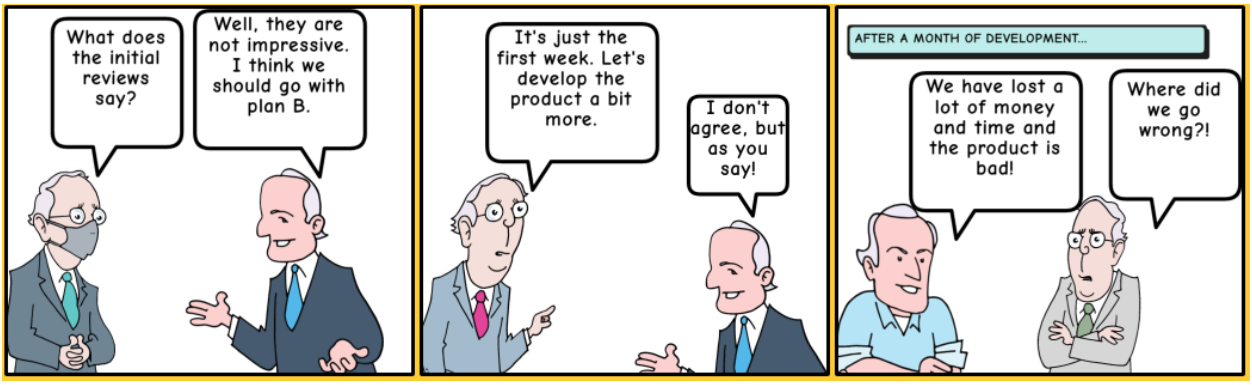
Rather than mulling over the 'terms of engagement' ask your client what they want.



For example, collaborating with your potential customer and asking them what they want and how they want their problem to be solved as compared to discussing the 'rules of engagement'.

Responding to change over following a plan

Building a small part of the project and then testing it out with the customer to ensure that both of you are on the same page and change directions based on those observations.



For example, if the first few review cycles inform you that a product is not going to fare well if made that way, there is a need to pivot. Understanding the change in users' mindset and behavior and morphing the product into what they actually want is more agile. It makes the product more useful.

One of the most crucial things that need to be understood about developing an eLearning course in the Agile way is that there are no specific set of steps of predefined processes that anyone can follow to get the desired results. Agile has a set of principles that will guide you and your team to achieve a better product-market fit for your eLearning course which will get the desired results in terms of both knowledge and output.

The present hurdles

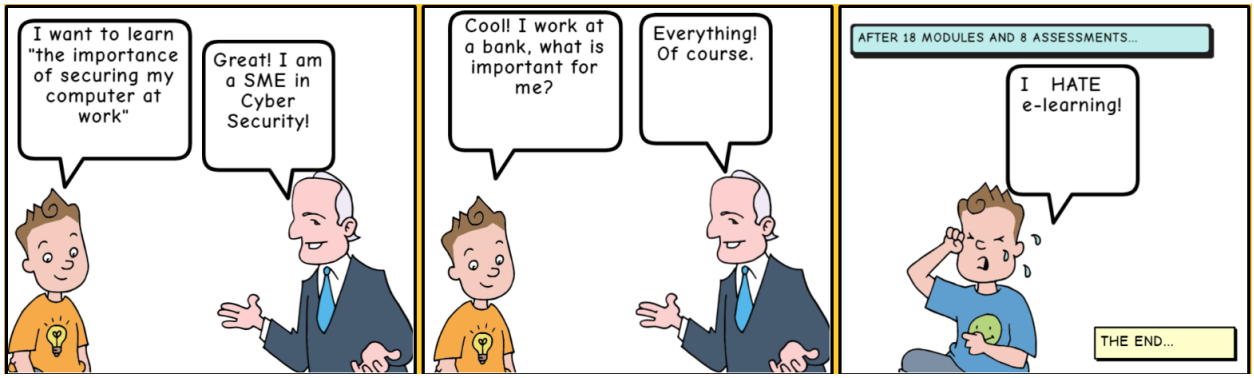
SMEs, clients, and developers: Different challenges faced by them

L&D experts always have to face the daunting task of getting everyone on the same page. The opinions of different sets of individuals involved in the development process are different and sometimes it could become a bit challenging on which direction you need to go to.

Since the sets of individuals involved in designing eLearning courses come from different diverse professional backgrounds, the challenges faced by them are different. Even though they all aim to build a course that will solve a problem faced by the clients, their approach becomes different as they see varied hurdles along the way.

- **SMEs**: David Blakely, Learning Specialist for Litmos have described the challenges faced by SMEs in the course of eLearning development. These are familiarizing themselves with effective learning models, being too immersed in the content, and not having a clear set of learning objectives intended for the target audience.

  For instance, generally, SMEs focus on the knowledge gap rather than the gap in outcome and performance. Although it may be useful to equip the learners with the knowledge, it may not be that useful to them in practice.

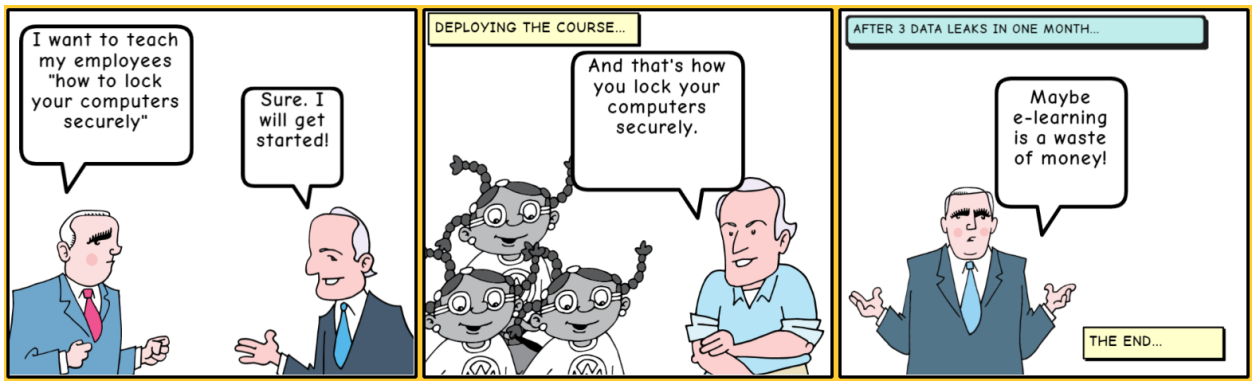


For example, if there is an eLearning course being built to teach employees "the importance of locking their system when they are away from their desk", SMEs are more likely to focus on imparting the entire knowledge about data security and its importance rather than just streamlining the learning experience for a particular purpose. The actual intent of the course, which is to keep the customers' data protected, takes the backseat.

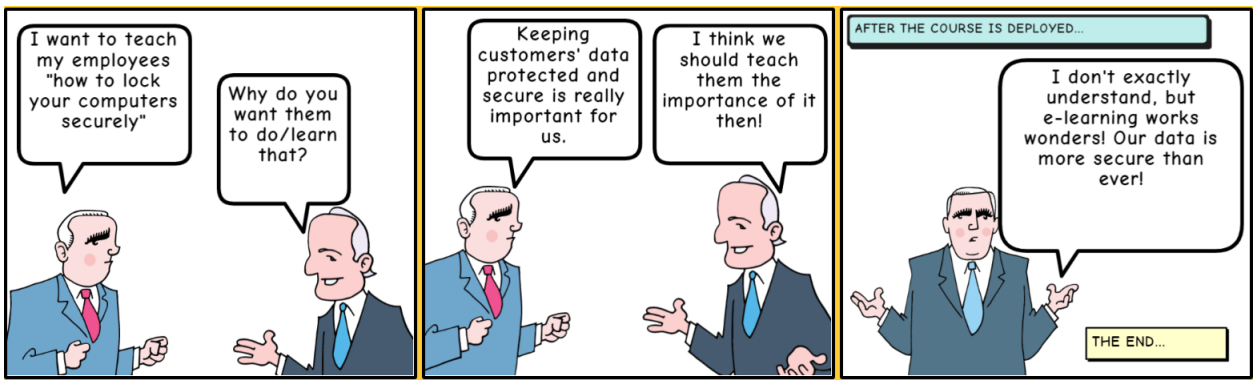
- **Clients**: Even though eLearning courses are one of the most effective ways to train employees, the heads of the organizations who are the clients of the developers face these challenges: understanding the void, motivating the learners, and measuring the success of the deployed eLearning course. These eLearning challenges make it difficult for the clients to describe their challenges.

  For instance, clients approach the developers and/or SMEs with an idea of what might solve their problem, which is far from the actual eLearning course which will give them results. The challenge emerges when the L&D professionals develop the said course and upon

deployment, it doesn't yield the expected results.



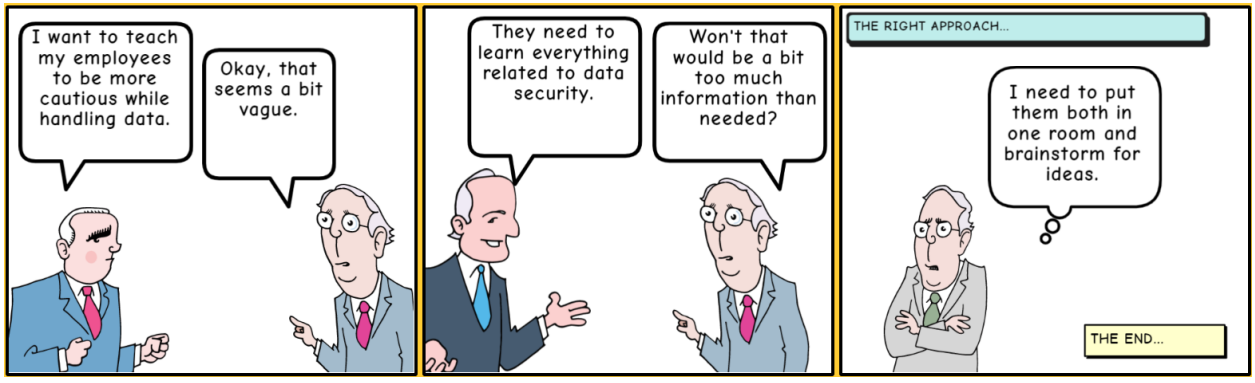
For example, if the clients are the senior professionals of a bank and they want their employees to lock their computers to protect customers' data, and they approach the developers and ask them to develop an eLearning course along the lines of "how to lock your computer", it will not yield them the results they want. The right approach will look something like this:



- **Developers**: According to a well-researched article by SHIFT eLearning, developers face a little bit of everything. The most important ones for them is getting everyone together, delivering on time, and doing whatever it takes to achieve the goals. Being the bridge between

everyone and then making decisions based on received feedback is important. Issues like this could be solved by putting the SMEs and the clients in the same room.

For instance, developers sometimes have to work with SMEs who have no instructional design knowledge and it is on them to make them understand the importance of the approach that has been adapted. Parallelly, if the clients are not properly communicative when it comes to their root cause of the problem, then all the developers and creators will do is take shots in the dark.



For example, consider the example of building an eLearning course for bank employees to inform them about the importance of data privacy which will make them more alert while handling sensitive data. On one hand, SMEs would like the employees to learn everything about data security while all the clients will be concerned with is to make their employees secure their admin accounts more.

ADDIE vs SAM vs Dick and Carey: choosing the right flow

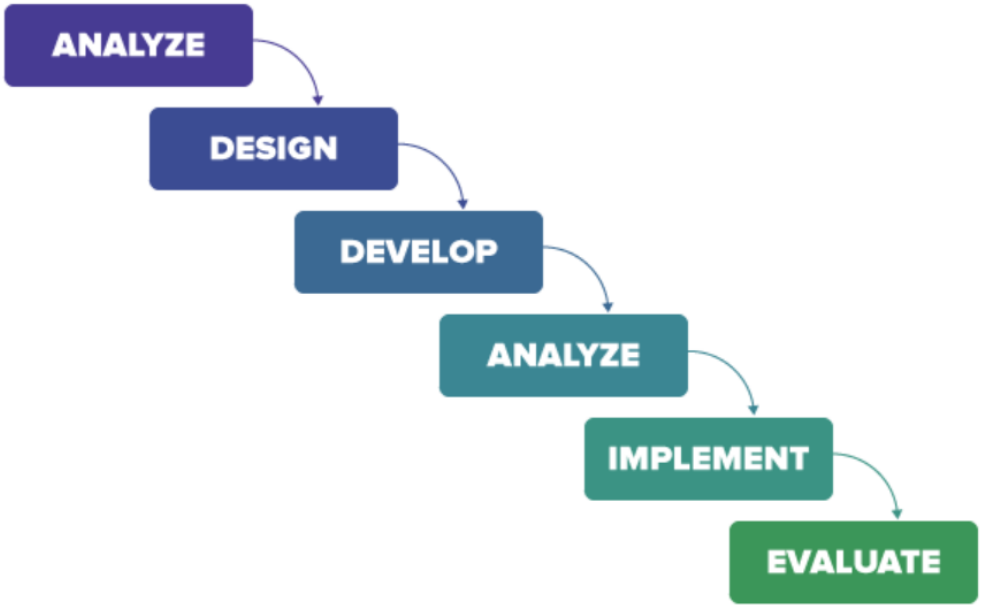
ADDIE and SAM are the frontrunners when it comes to choosing the best workflow to build an eLearning course. Although, there are other methodologies such as Dick and Carey model, ARCS, and ASSURE which are also followed by many. We have tried to understand the pros and cons of each of these models and

ADDIE

To employ ADDIE effectively in your workflow, one should understand its pros and cons rather than focussing on the steps to employ them. The flow of ADDIE is more like a “waterfall” method and it is quite easy to adapt. It has a set of steps and processes that makes using it really easy.

- **Pros**: It is commonly used and widely accepted for which it serves as the foundation for instructional designing. It is also really flexible due to which it can be used for different types of teaching like individual or traditional and can also be used with different evaluation techniques like in testing. New behavioral goals can be added into the “Evaluate” phase it and developers can mold the methodology to fit their narrative. This allows the developers to reduce base cost and also design the course’s outline faster.
- **Cons**: The most concerning disadvantage of ADDIE is that the process is **linear**. It means you have to be done with one phase before moving on to the next one. Due to this, for example, the design phase is separate from the development and implementation phase. Of course,

ADDIE comes with some modifications but still, it is hard to iron out some corners. One of the major consequences of it is one needs to go back a phase while making an iteration of either the design or one of the elements of the course.



How does ADDIE measure against Agile?

The linearity of the same could be the cause of headache for the developers during the later stages of the course development process. Moreover, since the "Evaluate" phase comes last, the developers and creators work with blindfolds on and it is generally a bit too late when they receive the reviews. Suffice to say, it is not Agile.

For example, while building a course on how important is data privacy, the SMEs, designers, clients, and developers will have no idea until an iteration of

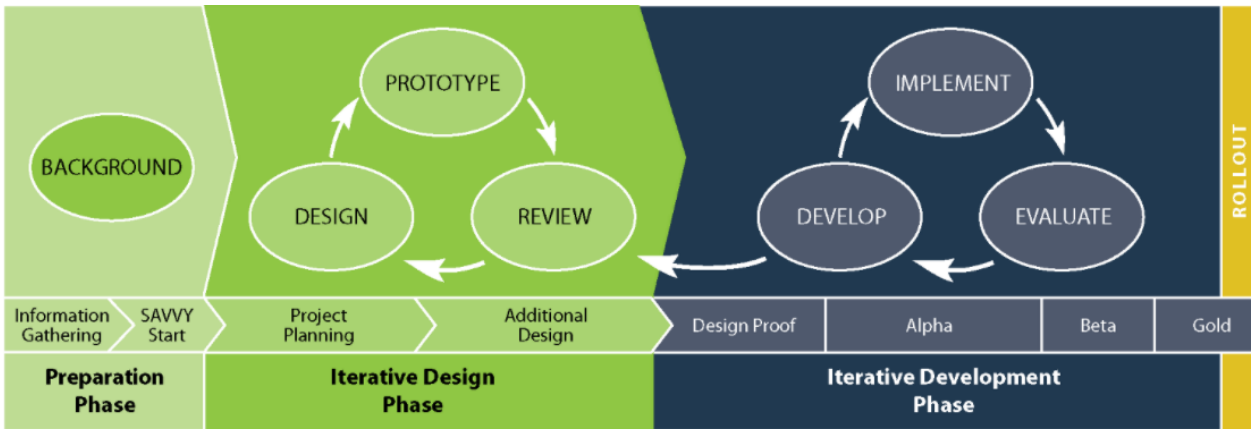
the eLearning material is tested. Till that point, a lot of resources will already be spent and the team will have to begin from the "Analyze" phase again.

ADDIE is not ideal to develop products that may require continuous iterations. It is useful for building a "once in a while" robust product which will have a lot of life expectancy. Furthermore, the individuals who work in a high level of abstraction in ADDIE workflow, need to set a bunch of processes and steps to make sure that the process is smoother. It is a good starting point but it is not surprising to notice that ADDIE is slowly vanishing when it comes to picking a model to develop eLearning courses.

SAM

This relatively new instructional design model which was adapted by ASTD(American Society for Training and Development) has a lot of benefits.

- Pros: This model is by definition very collaborative. It helps the developers, clients, and SMEs predict what they might need to change. Iterative models are loved for their responsive nature and SAM is no different. Consistent review cycles in this process give room for iteration and change in the entire duration of development.
- Cons: The disadvantages of SAM are dependent on the individuals in the team. If the developers and the designers know exactly what they are doing and what needs to be done, there will be no visible problems. However, if some of the individuals are inexperienced, there will be more than ideal numbers of review cycles which will lead to a lot of loss in terms of time and money.



How does SAM measure against Agile?

Even though SAM is quite iterative in nature, the iteration and modifications take place in one phase of the project.

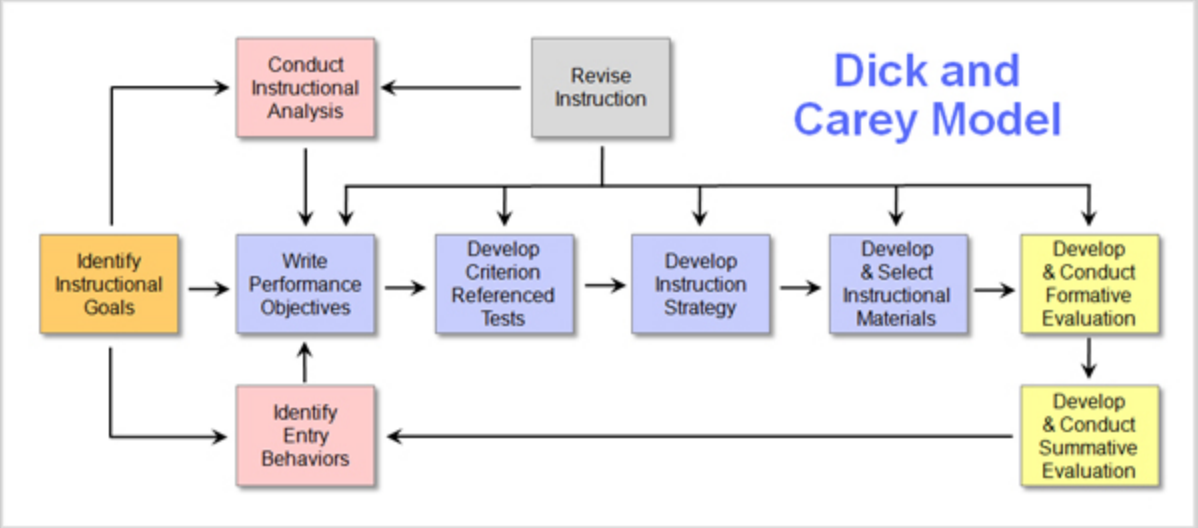
For example, if a project is in the "Iterative Development Phase" and there are some design flaws that need to be addressed, the entire project goes back to another phase. As a result of this, the eLearning course developed through SAM undergoes a lot of back and forth.

A lot of instructional designers switch to and from ADDIE and SAM depending upon the type, of course, they are building and the people around it. SAM works well when every individual in the team is experienced and does know what needs to be done.

Dick and Carey

Also known as the Systems Approach Model, Dick and Carey's model towards the instructional design approach is inspired by Robert Gagne's approach. It is used mostly to build curriculum courses for school.

- Pros: Dick and Carey's model is more systematic and the intermittent steps are properly defined. There is no ambiguity at any phase and the entire process really detailed making it easy to follow. One other advantage of the Dick and Carey model is that it has more review cycles or evaluation steps in it. It leaves less work to the imagination and lesser room for errors.
- Cons: It is still a 'process and that doesn't exactly define agility. It has a lot of steps within it and it does take a lot of resources to get through all of it. Moreover, each and any of the steps are of a lot of importance and are not skippable. From the top, it is still a linear process with a lot of 'review phases' in between and ceases to have a 'thinking on feet' iterative approach.



How does Dick and Carey model measure against Agile?

One of the characteristics of this model which appears Agile is that it allows the eLearning course under construction to go through a lot of lenses. It does make the process more lengthy even though it reduces the probability of

failure massively. It is not exactly in the sense that every step is not iterable and also in the sense that it has a 'linear' set of steps to it.

For instance, step six of the Dick and Carey model states that an instructional design strategy has to be developed and the seventh one is the step where the course is developed. There needs to be an iterative approach to both the steps, especially to the sixth step as iterating over the blueprint of the course is a much economical and faster way as compared to iterating over the course itself.

For example, when developing a course that highlights the importance of data security, it is always recommended to make edits and outline the content. Doing the edits after creating a draft of the course will be tedious and will cost a lot of time and money for the clients.

Allocating the right resources

Understanding the requirements of the project at hand will help the L&D teams determine the following things. It is quite challenging because these factors determine how successful, smooth, and Agile the whole process becomes.

Building a specific process

The framework or flow of the process to build a course depends on a lot of factors and some of them are:

- Length of the course
- Prerequisite knowledge of the learners
- The intent of the course

- Budget of the client
- Deadlines
- Available resources/ feasibility and viability

Choosing the right tools

While creating an eLearning course, after the flow has been decided, choosing the right tools is important. They should easily integrate into your workflow and every team member must be comfortable with them. A typical L&D team needs the following tools:

- Authoring tools
- Tools to generate multimedia content
- Communication tools
- Review and bug tracking tools
- Planning tools

Hiring able developers

An eLearning course is as good as its creators. Individuals working on it should be adequately experienced. It is really challenging to hire someone good, reliable, and comes within budget.

- Having adequate experience in instructional design
- Not being rigid to suggestion
- Available for sufficient hours in case they are freelancers
- Not too expensive

Word to the wise

It is important to know what is correct and applicable, but it is a must when it comes to knowing what doesn't work. Therefore, it is advised to learn and identify the processes and practices which are definitely not Agile.

The course is not built in iterations

Building small chunks of your eLearning course as compared to creating an entire draft before asking the learners and clients for feedback is risky. It will be more like taking shots in the dark and if the gamble doesn't pay off, there is a huge loss of resources.

Your team is not really a team

Working together and being a team is different. The answers to each of the following questions should be a resounding "Yes" if a team is Agile.

- Does everyone know the common goal?
- Does every team member know how they are contributing?
- Can every member explain the course intent to an outsider easily?
- Do they know their impact?

Flow is independent of feedback

The principles of Agile state signify that the process of building an eLearning course should depend on external feedback. If the following things are true, then the workflow is not Agile.

- You have one procedure to create courses.
- It is seldom modified, even though the course demands it.

- The validity of this “legacy” process is not questioned.
- Customers’ feedback doesn’t define or change the methodology.
- Customers are not involved in the course development process.

Only coding is Agile

There are many processes involved while making a course from doing the initial research to testing it with learners. It generally happens that the only intermediate developmental process is Agile but others are based on traditional approaches.

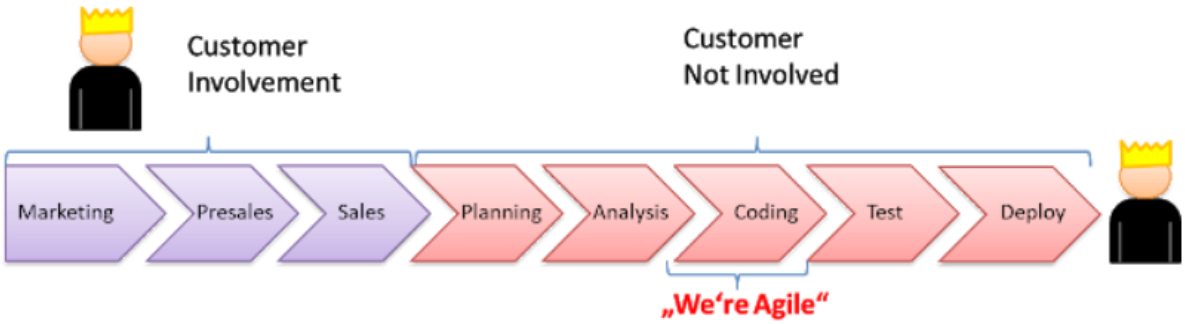


Image source: Oliver Peterson for process.st

It is important to understand the difference between “be agile” and “do agile”. One needs to understand the core principles of it to apply them in their eLearning course development process.

In the next part of this eBook, we will highlight how you can integrate Agile workflow easily into your course development process.

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Thank You!

We hope you enjoyed this eBook. Thanks for your continued support, we couldn't have done this without you.
Please let us know your opinions at: support@zipboard.co

This eBook was written by Bhavya Aggarwal and Tarasekhar Padhy.

About zipBoard

Founded in 2015, zipBoard - a visual review and bug tracking tool was created to make the lives of creators and developers better. zipBoard helps L&D professionals collaborate efficiently with their clients, stakeholders and reviewers by getting visual feedback in one place.

zipBoard has helped quite a few organizations in improving their eLearning course review process. Learn more.