IAM Talking:

It's 2009 - Are You Agile Yet?

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Dan Keldsen (IAI): This is Dan Keldsen, Co-founder and Principal at Information Architected (www.InformationArchitected.com).

Today **IAM Talking with Robert Dempsey** (ADS) who is an Agile development expert and certified Scrum Master. We'll clue you into what Scrum is all about and why he would be a master in it, shortly.

He has a lot of experience, over ten years of experience in this realm. He is currently the CEO of Atlantic Dominion Solutions or ADS (www.adsdevshop.com). He is a speaker, trainer, and consultant in web application development specifically with Ruby on Rails which is a framework and language which I've been watching for some time even though I'm largely out of the hands-on code business, this is something that I've been watching as a growing phenomenon. He is also heavily involved in the Scrum project management framework and we'll get to that again just in a moment.

What does ADS do? They build web-based and internal applications for clients all around the world and they also have a relatively new ADS apps suite which I hope to

Dan Keldsen (IAI): Thanks for your time today Robert. Great to get a chance to finally talk to you.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Dan, thanks for the great introduction and thanks for having me.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): My pleasure. So **the topic today is "It's 2009; Are you Agile Yet?"** I know this is something that I've been following for quite some time and there's a whole lot of confusion, some people will stare at me like deer in the highlights having no idea what I'm talking about and others are fully on-board with Agile and Scrum or extreme programming and things like that. So before we get too carried away, what is Agile and, specifically, what is Scrum, which is the variation that you're most honed in on.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Two great questions. First off, to answer the first one, Agile itself is a set of beliefs and practices, it's a way of going about things typically apply to software development. Scrum is a framework within Agile so, for example, also extreme programming and some other things such as Crystal and PRINCE (or PRINCE2) all fall under the Agile umbrella.

Scrum has its own set of, its own vocabulary. It puts more practices into Agile so that, with Agile, you have things like iterative development and Scrum adds to that with the concept of the daily Scrum as well. So it adds even more practices to what Agile provides.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): Ok. So, if we back up just a second, Agile is different from traditional software development how?

Robert Dempsey (ADS): In traditional ways of developing software you'd have big design up front and a lot of, well, the waterfall technique is typically seen as the traditional way of doing software development so that ... with any software project it's all about trying to manage and reduce risk. So in the very beginning of a software project you have a lot of risk involved because there are a lot of unknowns.

The traditional waterfall method would try and reduce the risk by the "big design up front" method which is to have an enormous amount of documentation that exactly how things would work. The only thing is is that that method does not respond to change very well, and especially in today's economic situation. The business climate is changing on a day to day basis and businesses need to be able to respond to that even within the projects that they have going on. So Agile provides a way of dealing with large amounts of uncertainty and living in a constantly changing world.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): So what I think is interesting, is that the waterfall method actually, if people were paying attention, there was a loop-back so that it should have been, it could have been more Agile than it typically is, but somehow that got lost along the way.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Right. And I think it was again because people were trying to, again, reduce the amount of risk involved in the project so, inevitably, they would do more and more and more up-front work in an attempt to forecast out what could possibly happen. The thing is that with software projects you can't really know. I mean, there is no crystal ball to say ok, we're going to run into all of the issues down the road so now let's account for all of those.

Combine that with continuously changing the business environment then you have a lot of project failure out there. Now that's not to say that waterfall itself is a bad way of doing things or that it doesn't work. For a lot of companies it has worked. There's been a lot of, well, someone yesterday said, "We got a man on the moon using the waterfall technique", right? But for a lot of situations I think that doesn't work. And especially in web development. I don't think that the waterfall method is very effective at all.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): Any toolset is only as good as the people using it. I think what's interesting is, even though I'm not officially a ScrumMaster, I haven't taken any extensive Agile training and I don't largely do coding anymore, it just makes sense to me and sometimes that raises a flag and sometimes that says, "Oh, great, other people think like this too." I guess the main thing for me is that Agile, Scrum, any variation of things like this is more about starting to get some things done so then you can correct the course as you're going rather than, it's not like, if I'm going from my house to work I know the path that I'm going to be taking with very slight changes in the path but when you're plotting towards a moving target, essentially, you have to adjust and if you wait too long to plan that whole thing out in advance then the chances that you're actually going to hit that end target are just infinitesimal.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Yes, agreed. Also one of the things about Scrum, yes we do use Scrum when we use Agile for software development but ultimately what it really comes down to is people and, like you just said, it's the people factor in projects also and what it attempts to do is to put a framework in place for managing people inside of the process.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): It has built in buffers essentially to acknowledge that change happens and you need to be able to adjust to that as it goes on because anybody who's been involved, whether you're coding or using essentially internally developed enterprise software is if it takes two years for you to get a solution ... I mean look how long it takes most ERP systems to get put in place, it takes two, three, four years for it to get put in place and during that whole period you're

not getting any value out of it because it's taken so long to get up and running. If you can do something to shorten that and even find out "will what we're trying to peruse even be useful in the end?" Maybe we were totally about this idea. The sooner you can get it underway you can decide maybe the course correction in this is case is that we're done with this project and we can move on to something else.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Yes. If you have to wait two to three to four years for something... Well, in my business what's in the past three to four years has completely changed. A lot of software has moved onto the web, businesses are now more tech savvy, there's a lot more broadband internet out there, in the US, and more businesses are becoming more comfortable with using the web and having applications on the web. That enables themselves to be more Agile because they don't have these projects that take years or even possibly months to get up and going. And as companies are still encountering that today then... they probably need to change what they're doing.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): Exactly, things have changed pretty dramatically just in the last three to nine months. (Laughter) We need to radically change the way that we're thinking about how long we're willing to wait for solutions and wouldn't it make more sense to get things active and working faster and acknowledge that nothing is perfect. I hate it when common sense just makes too much sense!

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Isn't the cliché that common sense is uncommon? (Laughter)

Dan Keldsen (IAI): The reason that we have clichés is because a lot of them are awfully true, even if we get tired of saying them over and over again.

So Scrum and Agile, things like this have been around for over a decade and as a former musician I like to joke that every over-night success takes at least ten years. So is it a success yet? Do you see people adopting this more rapidly?

Robert Dempsey (ADS): From what I've seen and from what I've read there are a lot more companies that are implementing Scrum and implementing Agile or variations. For example I was at the Agile project leadership network a number of months ago and they had a speaker from SalesForce. What SalesForce did was they took some practices from Scrum, then added in some other practices from XP then they threw in some Lean, with that, took into account their company culture and produced their own variation of Scrum and Agile that worked very well for them. In fact what I was told was that they were able to respond so well to customer change that they actually had to slow down because customers were then unable to keep up with the amount of change that they could put in place. They could pump out so many features so rapidly that they actually had to slow down.

Then again, just like waterfall doesn't work in all situations, Scrum doesn't work in all situations. However the use of Scrum and Agile techniques, whether "pure" or otherwise, is growing because, with the current economic situation, literally with any economic situation but really with the rapid pace of change nowadays companies need to be able to respond and also traditionally there's been this tremendous disconnect between IT and business and there's been a lot of talk for years about aligning IT and business better. Ultimately IT supports the business and the business goals. And so what that means is that we need more communication between the two sides. Agile and Scrum and the techniques that are involved with those help to break down the barriers that have been placed between business and IT and getting things done so that the business can then move on and become profitable and no simply die because projects take way too long to do. So a long answer to your question, but in short I would say yes.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): You bring up a good point and we'll cut it off right about here. There are all sorts of things that we could talk about and we've already been talking a fair amount before we started recording. There's a lot that has come about since Scrum first came about, since Agile. I certainly see the ties back to Lean Thinking and Lean Manufacturing; that's a 60 plus year old phenomenon. Why don't more people do that? These are all related topics. I think the one point I want to hone in just briefly on what you just talked about is that there's a specific component, my understanding of it anyhow, of Scrum and Agile that really ties together business and technical people because without product ownership and ... what were the specific roles that are involved?

Robert Dempsey (ADS): There's Scrum Master, which is kind of like the project manager. Then there's the Scrum Team which is typically a cross-functional team that is actually producing the work. And then there's the Product Owner which, for us, during custom development, could be a client or internally could be myself or, for a company, it could be a division of a business or it could be one specific person leading a project.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): And the product owner is not somebody who says, "This is what I want" then walks away and is never heard from again until you deliver something in the end and says this is horrible.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Correct. No, the Product Owner has to be fully involved in the project. They're really an integral part of the project because they are saying what is developed when. But they, ultimately, it's up to them to drive the direction from the project. And if you have a situation where you might have, like an ERP system that would actually touch multiple divisions of a company and that product owner has to take into account the different requirements and priorities of all of those parties, bring that together into one solid list and then hand that to the development team and then while work is being done it's a really hand in hand process with the product owner constantly getting feedback, giving constant feedback and no, he cannot just walk away after saying, "This is what I want." They have to be fully involved also.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): I think that's probably one of two key things that I take away from Agile, Scrum, anything like this, is that you cannot plan for everything and that everybody who's involved needs to always be staying because it's a collaborative effort. Otherwise it falls apart because all the expectations fall apart and things get lost as time separates from when you first decided this is what you were doing and whatever that length of time is in between deciding it and actually implementing it or making it happen, everybody's sense of what was supposed to be delivered radically changes and probably not for the better.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Absolutely. And also there are multiple ways to interpret difference things. So, for instance, if you're our customer and you say, "Ok I need users to be able to log in or sign up for an account" that whole signup process can be done many different ways. And so as a product owner I need you to tell me what your interpretation of it is rather than me coming up with this off the top of my my head and it not being right, right? There's another cliché in software development. I don't know if it's only development but in general where you don't know what you want so you see what you don't want. So this constant collaborative process tries to make so that that doesn't happen.

Dan Keldsen (IAI): I'm sure there is a lot that we could talk about, regarding Agile and Scrum, the move to software as a service and being able to instantly fire up services which, I know that you have a number of offerings that maybe we can circle around another time and maybe talk about, including a web based product for doing product management using Scrum that you call Scrum'd.

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I think this is a nice little nugget that helps, I hope, get people to get their heads around, and I'm not saying and surely you're not saying either that Scrum is magic, that it can instantly shorten the life cycle of any software development project. But, whether you adopt Scrum or Agile or anything like this, there probably is a better way, a more effective way that you can deliver software or consume software, however you choose to think of it, than what you're doing now, unless you've already kind of seen the light.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): I totally agree with that!

Dan Keldsen (IAI): Ok, great! Let me sum up: the topic today; "It's 2009, Are you Agile Yet?" and the sub-title would then be, "If you Aren't, For God's Sake Why Not?"

I was talking today with Robert Dempsey, who is the CEO and a whole lot of other things at Atlantic Dominion Solutions and you can find them on the web at www.adsdevshop.com and also find products like Scrum'd, Expens'd, and Prioritiz'd. I found Robert quite easy to get a hold of and to have conversations with. If you are interested in anything that they're doing, whether it's Scrum-based or any of the products that they have I would recommend that you not hesitate to get in touch with them.

Again, this is Dan Keldsen, I'm the co-founder of Information Architected in Boston, MA at www.InformationArchitected.com. Thank you very much for your time today Robert.

Robert Dempsey (ADS): Thanks very much Dan, it was great fun.

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