eGov Strategies

Agile Development in a Bureaucratic World

By Charlee Beasor

It's 9:30 a.m. on a Thursday morning and about 13 people (and three dogs – Rava, Dugger and Wrigley) are gathered around a conference room at eGov Strategies in downtown Indianapolis.

Gearing up for their daily stand-up meeting, Jason Breitweiser is trying to get a remote conference call to show up on the screen in order to connect with the company's remote workforce.

"Boy, this is not going like rehearsal," company co-founder and chief solutions officer Ken Barlow quips, breaking the nervous tension that accompanies any technical glitch in front of a group (especially when there's an outsider invited to observe the whole thing).

"Hey, it woke up!" Breitwieser exclaims, to cheers.

Pretty soon, each person is delivering brief updates on their projects, any roadblocks (referred to as "blockers") to resolutions, the status of client relationships and more.

Breitwieser explains that anyone on the team can solve a blocker.

"One example of a blocker: When I first started, Ken's sitting at this very table and is shaking the mouse, frantically, saying 'I can't get this to work.' We don't have any batteries anywhere in this office building," he recalls.

"So, I brought in batteries. That was an example of a blocker, when I was introducing *this*. It's team problem solving."

The "this" Breitwieser refers to is agile development, a project management system that includes short-term "sprints," or bursts of work done in three-week time periods, and more frequently shared with the customer to create an iterative product.

At eGov Strategies, the customer is a state or local government or municipality. Founded in Indianapolis in 1999 by Barlow and chief technology officer Alan Pyrz, the company has two lines of business: designing, building and hosting web sites, and processing payments for government entities.

Basement beginnings

Pyrz and Barlow were on the team that created the city of Indianapolis' first web site in 1996, at the behest of then-Mayor Stephen Goldsmith. They started a company, but during the end of the dotcom boom.

"Even though that company grew, nothing really came out of it. We got some local clients, but when that went bust, we got fired from our own company, which is kind of an interesting thing to go through," Barlow recalls. "We got contacted by one of the governments we were working for and they said, 'We kind of like what you're doing.' "

The pair reignited the company and founded it, in Pyrz's basement, as eGov Strategies.

"It didn't exactly start off the fastest growing company, but we've had solid growth,

30% the past four or five years on average. The future is really bright," Barlow adds. "It's really about making it easier for governments to serve their constituents. It's easier for people to get their taxes and bills online. They can see how much they owe for taxes and payments."

The pair brought on Skeets James as chief executive officer eight years ago to help with financial modeling and fundraising.

"They said, 'We need somebody to come in and give us direction, and with experience and get (us) some money,' and they just turned everything over to me," James recalls.

The company has clients across the United States; eGov Strategies is the largest credit card child support payment processor in the country, Barlow says.

"We facilitate property tax payments for the third largest county in the U.S., which is Harris County, Texas, which is where Houston is," he shares. "We got that contract a year or so ago. That's enabled us to process now over $1 billion in payments. That's a goal we'd always had."

'I came here, and they changed'

Back to the stand-up meeting where the rest of the development team – working mostly remotely – give their updates. One team member mentions that his daughter is having surgery, so he'll be working from the hospital.

"Good luck with the surgery, Joe, we hope everything goes well," Jason Morris, director of merchant services, offers to the voice on the screen.

Daily stand-up meetings at eGov Strategies provide the Indianapolis-based team and its remote workforce the ability to practice agile development. A few four-legged friends typically join in the day-to-day work life.

Most of the company's daily meetings last anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes and while business is thoroughly discussed, laughter abounds as jokes and barbs are thrown across the room.

Barlow pipes up that he'd wanted the company to have open office seating initially. But agile development and stand-up meetings allow employees to collaborate, while also enjoying their privacy.

"It never feels like I'm very far away from the rest of the team, even when I'm working remotely," offers Collin Larson, who checks in from Fredrick, Maryland.

Barlow refers to Breitwieser, who's been with eGov Strategies about a year and a half, as "a guy who knew what agile really was. He said, 'Here's how you do it, here's the software to use.' "

Part of Breitwieser's decision in coming to work for eGov Strategies was the willingness to embrace change.

"They've needed this change for 15 years," he relays. "These guys knew what they wanted. I asked them (during the interview process), 'How averse to change are you?' They paused, they said, 'We want to change.'

"I came here, and they changed."

Accountable, flexible

Having office pets is a leftover tradition from the company's basement beginnings.

But for Lawrence Ballenger, director of application development, the ability to have his pup Rava with him in the office two days a week enables him to get more work done. He works from home the other three days.

Ballenger was spending so much time in the office when he started working at eGov Strategies eight years ago that it was challenging to take care of Rava.

"It's a nice perk, because it gave us the flexibility. Rava does great and can go for 12 hours, but not every dog can do that," he concedes.

Accountability is part of the flexibility at eGov Strategies. For instance, Ballenger and his wife are passionate about snowboarding. They have a weekly pass at Perfect North Slopes in Lawrenceburg and on Fridays, while their two-year-old daughter is at daycare, the pair hit the slopes.

"My wife will drive, and I'll use a tether and we'll go down there and I can flex my day – go boarding for two or three hours and I'll work and join our Friday code review. It is nice to have that flexibility and be able to do those things," he offers. "They say, 'We know you're

Company outings, flexible working environment, pick-up basketball games, a celebration of personal missteps with the annual "Debacle of the Year" and more lead to a culture where turnover is rare.

getting your stuff done. If you've got stuff to get done (outside of work), go do it.'

"Everybody here is just really good at what they do, so it's fun to be in an environment like that. It allows you to be creative and push your own boundaries yourself," he shares.

Right people in the right place

James points out that of the company's 16 employees, six have computer-related college degrees.

"The reality is, if you're into software development, you don't necessarily need a college degree. Jason, the guy that brought us agile, he is self-taught, and a lot of people are like that," he says. "We've got some of the best in the city, which is really helping us. Alan, he's a civil engineer and a lawyer, but he wrote a lot of the code to start with.

"The key is surrounding yourself with the right people."

Pyrz is self-taught. He says Ballenger came in as a professional developer and helped "shore up" the process. But a degree is just not as necessary here, he stresses.

"Are you smart? Do you work hard? Are you willing to learn? Those are key aspects," Pyrz contends.

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