

Book Review:

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Agile Project Management: Running PRINCE2™¹ projects with DSDM Atern

Introduction

For those not familiar with "Agile" project management methodologies, Agile Projects claim to deliver faster, better and cheaper projects than their more conventional competing methodologies, unkindly called "Monumental" by Agilists.

It would take more than the space that I have available to properly outline the Agile view of Project Management but one of the key elements is that predictability is unobtainable. Another is that we really do not know precisely what is required until we can demonstrate partial product. Consequently, some of the characteristics of Agile projects include incremental and iterative construction, continuous test and integration, close involvement of the end-users / stakeholders and so on. In DSDM Atern we also have Time boxing which can affect the way Stages are performed and the acceptance of Highlight Reporting (see later).

DSDM, or Dynamic Systems Development Method to its friends, is one example of an Agile methodology. The book being reviewed compares DSDM Atern (the latest incarnation of DSDM) with PRINCE2 (based on the 2005 publication), seeking synergies as well as contradictions, in an attempt to bring together the best of both worlds. Atern is an accepted abbreviation for DSDM Atern and I shall use it during the remainder of this review.

Of course, if you have correctly understood and implemented PRINCE2, there will be no conflict between Agile methods and PRINCE2. PRINCE2, because of its focus on scalability and tailoring, is able to support most (reasonable) methodologies, including those based on Agile concepts. There will be terminology differences and overlapping of processes, management products and so on. The book aims at identifying these and specifically defining how the two views should be brought together.

What's in the book?

The book is refreshingly lightweight, running to just 91 pages of approximately A5 size.

In Part 1, it encompasses a rationale for integration of PRINCE2 and Atern, a PRINCE2 and Atern overview, separate analyses of using PRINCE2 and of using Atern on projects and an overview of the synergy of integrating PRINCE2 with Atern.

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Part 2 provides specific guidance on combining the two approaches. Individual sections are provided for the detailed description of how to combine the Process Models, the Organisation Structures, PRINCE2 Components and PRINCE2 and Atern techniques.

Part 3 provides a scenario example, using the Conference Example from the PRINCE2 manual (see Product-based Planning section), but applying Atern techniques.

Part 4 provides some terminology definitions, Glossaries and guidance on tailoring PRINCE2 management products to Atern.

Finally, there is an extensive set of Appendices:

- Appendix A reviews each of the PRINCE2 management products and explains whether and how they should be modified when implementing with Atern.
- Appendix B addresses the principles and terminology of DSDM V4.2
- Appendix C provides a reference list for further information
- Appendix D is a Glossary of DSDM and PRINCE2 terminology

Comments

My first thought on hearing of this book was to question its need. There is nothing in PRINCE2 that prevents an agile approach being taken, so why write a book on the subject. However, as I read further into the material it became clear that there are issues that need to be explicitly resolved if Agile processes are to be easily incorporated. It is pretty common that PRINCE2 is perceived to be a heavy weight process. Why should this be? After all, it does make quite a song and dance about being scalable. It is possible that heavyweight PRINCE2 implementations result from misunderstanding what PRINCE2 says, or possibly full PRINCE2 implementations provide a hiding place for the nervous ("It wasn't me guv, PRINCE2 said to do it!").

The book deals with terminology issues, mapping PRINCE2 terms into Atern's and vice versa. It also deals explicitly with the PRINCE2 Controls and Techniques. Interestingly I had a discussion with the author, Keith Richards, on his statement that PRINCE2 does not mandate Product-Based Planning. It turned out that originally he had written that it did, but two PRINCE2 authorities told him that PBP was not mandatory. PRINCE2 does not actually use the word "mandatory" but Product-based Planning is so embedded in PRINCE2 that it is hard to imagine PRINCE2 without it. It is a poor reflection on the clarity of the PRINCE2 manual that such fundamental topics remain unclear and that we appear to need a vote on the subject. In this case I think Keith needs to clarify the situation, but then so does PRINCE2.

As a summary, and not to replace a need to read the book, PRINCE2 Organisational structure broadly stays. A fifth layer is introduced, to cover the product delivery team. There is a more serious effect on Product delivery as product Delivery (Stages) in Atern are time boxed, so this has an effect on Stages and Stage Acceptance. Also the Project Board need to understand that just because a stage is within Budget and Time, it may be because less is being delivered! (Time boxing prioritises schedule against functionality).

Much of the mapping of Atern into PRINCE2 is obvious, but the description is worth providing because it should give the interested reader the confidence to integrate Atern processes and indeed other Agile processes into PRINCE2.

I missed a single overview diagram of the integrated processes of PRINCE2 and Atern, although the text describing it is pretty clear (a picture being worth a). Nonetheless, a single diagram in the PRINCE2 style would be very helpful.

The Quality component of PRINCE2 gets the biggest adjustment. This is because PRINCE2 assumes a predictive approach (expecting that we can accurately say what we are building to some level of detail) whilst Atern is more convergent, meaning that the aim of the project is successively refined as the project progresses. Change is also an issue here. PRINCE2 likes to avoid change and works hard at controlling it. Agile methods embrace it. Consequently PRINCE2 Change control, for an Atern implementation, needs a somewhat lighter touch than is expressed in PRINCE2. Similar comments apply to Project Issues. Agile approaches require a faster and often informal approach. PRINCE2 can of course adopt these, but the book goes into more detail on how this should be done and explores the consequences.

The writing style is clear and easy to understand and the book is concise and precise. The detailed guidance on tailoring the PRINCE2 Management products was particularly helpful.

Summary

This is a very useful book for those looking to bring an Agile process, specifically Atern, into PRINCE2. However, there are other Agile processes, XP, AUP, ESSUP and SCRUM, to name just a few. Perhaps the style of the book could be taken as a template for describing future mappings of Agile (and indeed other) processes into PRINCE2? This would certainly help in comparing the effort and approach of bringing a particular Agile process into PRINCE2. Perhaps APMG should look into this as it certainly is going to reoccur.

My main objection is the lack of overall diagramming of Processes in the PRINCE2 style. Otherwise this is a very readable and useful book and I recommend it to the broad interests of Agilists currently working or planning working under the PRINCE2 umbrella.

About the Reviewer

George Brooke is a PRINCE2 Approved Trainer with Advantage Learning Ltd. As Head of Software Development at Siemens Nixdorf he managed solutions development for the Open Systems, Retail, Hotel and Energy markets for UK/European departments and customers worldwide, from concept through to delivery and roll-out,

Book Information

“Agile Project Management: Running PRINCE2 projects with DSDM Atern” is available from books@advantagelearning.co.uk - £25.00 + postage