How to improve the performance of your Agile delivery

When Agile came along it made some bold promises about being a *better* way to work; for many organisations it has failed to deliver on this promise. We believe Agile Delivery performance management is a long overdue topic the industry needs to now consider.

> *Getting an Agile delivery model optimised and then being able to confidently demonstrate that it is performing well, is proving quite difficult for organisations.*

In this paper I will provide a little background from a whole-of-industry perspective as to why Agile often fails to improve delivery; then I'll provide a suggested list of change activities that Source Agility uses to maximise the chances of achieving high levels of Agile delivery performance. Finally, I will provide you with a list of measures that will allow you to monitor and improve the performance of your Agile delivery.

Why Agile is not delivering (as expected)

Agile is the next big thing in ways of working that will accelerate a team's ability to deliver value. Despite widespread adoption of Agile methods, many organisations still report issues with delivery performance. The key reasons fall into the following areas:

Insufficient focus on management practices

Having coached and advised dozens of organisations on the adoption of Agile, I can honestly say that the teams doing the work are the least resistant to working with Agile.

> *80%+ of the consulting and advisory work Source Agility does relates to enabling changes to management and executive policies, processes and behaviour.*

It is tempting for organisations to adopt the "easy" parts of Agile methodologies such as renaming team meetings or using Agile work management tools. To achieve improvement in delivery performance, management needs to be provided with the means to govern and assure the work, this is achieved through the right data and associated Agile delivery performance metrics. A data-driven approach is the best way to help managers and executives continue in their roles as Agile is adopted. If we provide them with the right data, they can then feel more confident to change what they do and how they do it.

Agile versus the Project Management Office (PMO)

The role of the PMO in the governance and assurance for Agile delivery is a common consulting assignment for Source Agility. Like the role of project managers, PMO staff can play an important role in enabling changes to the way of working, especially in how work is assured and governed throughout a project, a product's life or the end-to-end flow of "packets" of work.

Often however, Agile evangelists see the PMO and what it represents as the "enemy" of Agile adoption. It is true that some who work in PMOs resist change with a mindset that emphasises control and predictability over adaptiveness; but this is part of the change work that needs to be done. An 'us versus them' battle between the PMO and Agile is not only unfortunate and wasteful but completely unnecessary.

The traditional functions of governance and assurance that the PMO leads should be designed in at the start of an Agile change program.

> *The unique set of skills the PMO team bring should be utilised in the design and implementation of the Agile delivery governance model.*

The Agile Framework Industry

Frameworks and processes don't deliver work; people do. There are many Agile frameworks vying for the number 1 position as the preferred industry standard. Most framework owners are large consulting companies with a profit motive, owned and run for commercial returns. The resulting framework industry has come with associated marketing and promotional activities that create the perception that using an Agile framework significantly reduces the risk of a change program failing. These promises of an easier adoption seem to be most heavily promoted to medium to large organisations where Agile is being adopted at scale.

All organisations are different and unique. Any framework will need to be implemented into each organisation in a different manner; the framework sellers do not agree with this and encourage leaders to "install" their version of Agile (their framework) into the organisation as it is, otherwise, risk failure. What usually happens is organisations adopt parts of a framework and get "stuck" halfway in their adoption when the change becomes difficult.

> *An oversimplification of the challenges faced during Agile adoption has resulted in half-way Agile adoptions and delivery underperformance.*

Suggestion: Before your organisation decides whether it should implement a commercial Agile framework, it is important to clarify the specific needs of the organisation. The one size fits all approach rarely works with Agile implementation. More often than not, it tends to cause more problems.

Unaccountable Agile Coaches

If you are adopting Agile ways of working, then you require Agile coaches to help embed the changes across the organisation. For the last decade this sentence has been taken as a truth; no longer.

Agile Coaching is an enablement service that provides people who are part educator, part Agile expert, part mindset/behaviour coach. The role's popularity has resulted in another Agile industry, often related to the framework sellers I previously mentioned, the Agile certification industry.

It seems everyone with strong career aspirations wants to be an Agile coach; this has resulted in over-certified but inexperienced Agile coaches offering their services to organisations aiming to adopt Agile.

Contrast the Agile Coach role with Agile consultants who are experts in Agile but also accountable for the adoption and introduction of change into the organisation.

> *Agile Coaches are often not accountable for the adoption of change, whereas consultants usually are.*

Because of the challenges associated with the Agile Coach role, Source Agility prefers to use Agile consultants that have coaching skills. This is what we recommend organisations consider when looking for enablement support during their Agile change program.

How to get Agile Delivering

Now that I have provided some of the reasons Agile may underperform, I want to outline a few suggestions on how to enable improved performance; and get Agile delivering!

My experience has taught me that to get Agile delivery performing two things are required:

1. **specific Agile enablement activities** that maximise the chances of a successful change program
2. **collection of the right set of data** to monitor changes in performance resulting from any change introduced.

Here are the activities and what data points will help you measure and monitor Agile delivery performance.

1. Specific Agile enablement activities

Appoint accountable consultants

When starting a change program ensure you have enough accountable change agents; people who are incentivised and motivated to enable observable change in people's behaviour. Hiring too many advisors and coaches who care but are not accountable for change, raises the risk of failure. Accountable change agents are people who will "roll up their sleeves" and do the work required to enable and help others change; not just provide advice or opinion.

I often use the example of the person that steps up, picks up the whiteboard marker and heads to the *front of the room* to lead the conversation versus the strongly opinionated advisor who sits at the *back of the room* providing thoughts and ideas for consideration. Both of these behaviours are required, but assertively driving change from the front of the room should always precede a "back of room" approach. That way the consulting coach *shows the way* for the client prior to stepping back and enabling them to learn Agile by doing it for themselves.

Make the system visible

Unseen work, extra work, a slow and wasteful system with too much work in progress; all of these dysfunctions are very common in organisations I visit for the first time. It is difficult

to recommend changes to a delivery system if you cannot inspect it and have shared views/perspectives of how work gets delivered.
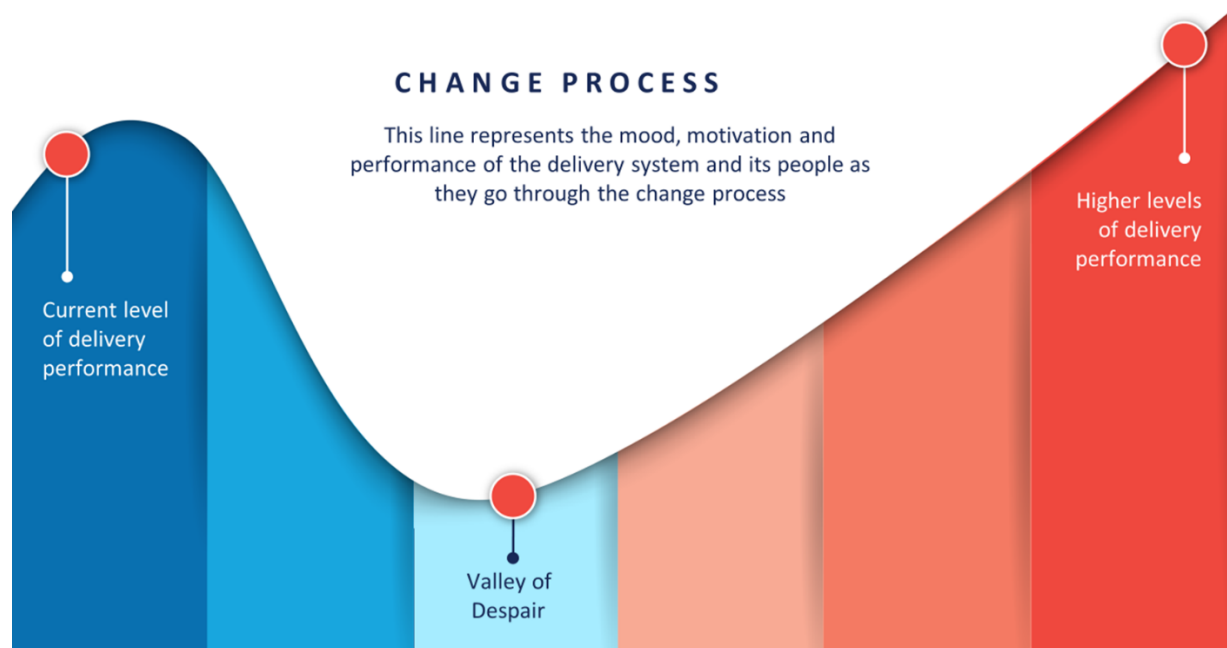
So, if you are sponsoring or responsible for the performance of Agile delivery and do not know how work travels through the system from one stage to another, then I suggest starting here. Create transparency of both the processes and the work in the system, blockers and impediments to the flow of work will then be highlighted and visible for you and your team to remove/resolve.

Baseline delivery performance

One of the biggest mistakes I see being made repeatedly are organisations that embark on an Agile change program and do not measure the effectiveness and efficiency of delivery processes prior to changing them.

As the change process progresses into what I call the valley of despair (the stage of change where resistance is encountered) Agile ways of working comes under pressure, people want to revert back to old ways. The diagram below shows this valley. It is at this time that having data to prove that Agile is improving delivery performance is valuable for sponsors who are asking the organisation to push on with the change and not revert back to old ways.

But if no data has been collected to baseline the performance of delivery before the change to Agile, then how can any benefits resulting from the change be measured?

CHANGE PROCESS

This line represents the mood, motivation and performance of the delivery system and its people as they go through the change process

Current level of delivery performance

Higher levels of delivery performance

Valley of Despair

Decide desired level of Agility

Agile, as a way of working, is a means, not an end. What I mean by this is certain parts of an organisation will benefit from higher levels of agility, whereas other areas not so much. Specific teams, project or programs will require Agile ways of working to achieve the best outcome for the organisation; think digital software. Others like infrastructure or construction, not so much.

So, I would suggest being explicit about where and why you require Agile delivery. Especially if you're at the start of your Agile change journey, be purposeful about where to introduce changes; maybe target where it will have the most benefit first.

Identify process waste

Here's a question I often ask managers who are accountable for the performance of large delivery portfolios.

What is the biggest impediment to delivery performance in the system as it stands now; and show me the data to back up your answer?

I have never had a manager come back to me with an acceptable answer. Every large complex system will contain some form of waste; time spent waiting between value-adding activities, over production, building more of the wrong thing, fixing defects etc. The key to high performance delivery is not blindly implementing Agile, but analysing where the waste is and using Agile as a means to reduce waste.

I recommend creating value stream maps for each delivery system you are aiming to improve. It is a simple activity but produces valuable data that helps identify where in the system the impediments to delivery performance lie.

Below is an example of a map created to show process efficiency and cycle time for the delivery of work by a program. Viewing it you can see where the waste is.

76 days end-to-end lead time with 20% process efficiency
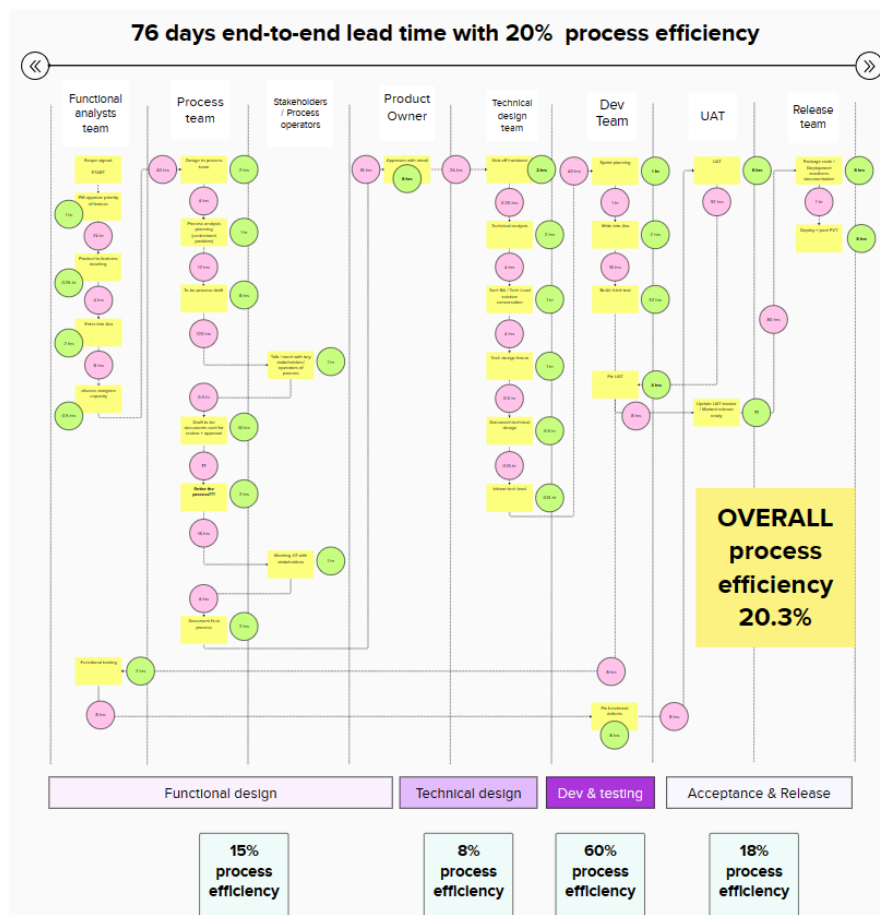
Remove impediments

Often it is the impediments preventing Agile adoption that form the basis of the change program.

By removing, altering and adjusting the constraints that are holding back the organisation from being more Agile, the way of working will mature and improve over time.

What this means is that a formal and structured practice involving sponsors, management and executives needs to be put in place to ensure issues and blockers to Agile adoption are quickly and efficiently removed, otherwise the change program stalls and loses momentum and ultimately fails. I call this an "impediment removal pathway" where issues stopping higher levels of delivery performance travel up to the level in the organisation where they are best resolved. Sometimes a blocker needs to get in front of an executive to be solved but has no pathway to get there.

Suggestion: make impediments a talking point in your current governance meetings. Put an agenda item into your steering/assurance meetings that asks, "What is stopping us from accelerating delivery and how can this leadership team take on the responsibility for removing these impediments?".

Identify cultural patterns

If you want to successfully adopt Agile delivery then the culture of the organisation has to adapt. People need to believe this is a real change and not just another means to reduce cost or increase productivity.

The change to Agile should not be seen as a productivity initiative but a means of engagement to assist the workforce to contribute to better outcomes

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An Agile change program should be seen as a way of improving the employee experience, empowering them to get on with doing their job with less frustrating admin.

I recommend being careful but explicit in your communication on why Agile is being adopted; it is best framed as a positive change that aims to improve the work life of those people delivering value for the organisation. In this way it is a signal (a promise from management and the executive) that things are going to change for the better due to the implementation of Agile delivery methods.

The challenge for leaders is then to deliver on that promise to the workforce, whilst improving delivery performance for the organisation.

Obtain the highest possible sponsorship

An Agile delivery change program is as successful as the height of its sponsorship.

Many times, I have been given the job of improving a team's Agile delivery performance only to run into an impediment that was outside of the team's control. It is then that I get to test the height of my change sponsorship.

Eventually all Agile delivery performance problems run into the same impediments/challenges. The top three are:

1. how funds are allocated annually to teams to do their work,
2. organisational structures or designs that do not support Agile delivery
3. executives unwilling to change their behaviour as they govern and assure delivery

Having an executive or even the CEO be the sponsor of an Agile change program is the best way to increase your chances of success. If this is not possible then seek as high a sponsor as you can to ensure impediments can be removed.
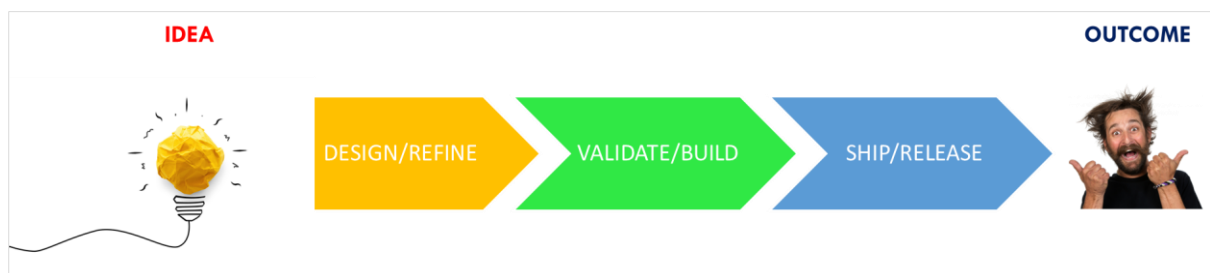
Performance Metrics for Agile Delivery

If we don't bring data to support our opinions, then discussions on delivery performance can fall into arguments and destructive conflict.

Using metrics to monitor Agile delivery performance is difficult if you do not design data collection into the way of working. Below is the list of measures and associated data points that I advise my clients to collect. From this data, metrics are created to firstly baseline Agile delivery performance and then monitor the impact of changes introduced to improve the way of working.

The basis for Agile delivery performance metrics

Let us consider what we are measuring and collecting data on when we talk about an Agile delivery system. The graphic below shows in a (very) simplified manner the cycle or process from idea to outcome (value).


We can argue what to call each of the phases but essentially we need to refine an idea before validating it, building out the solution and finally shipping it.
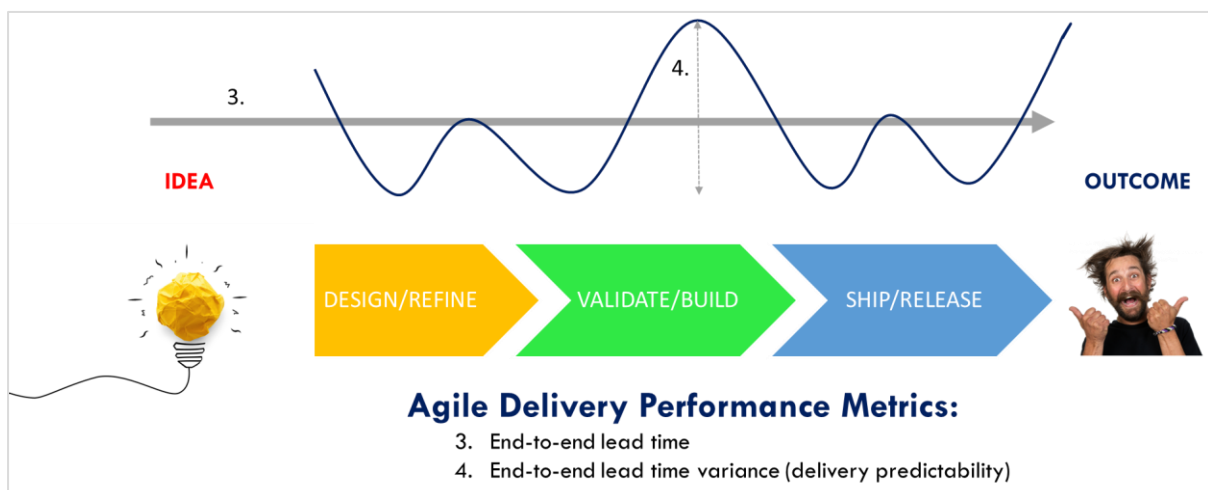
8 metrics for Agile Delivery Performance

Now let's consider measures of performance across these phases of an Agile delivery system. What is shown is here is simplified and aims only to introduce you to the concepts of each metric; how this will apply in an organisation involves much analysis (the subject of another paper).

Agile Delivery Performance Metrics:
1. Design and refine cycle time
2. Build to release cycle time
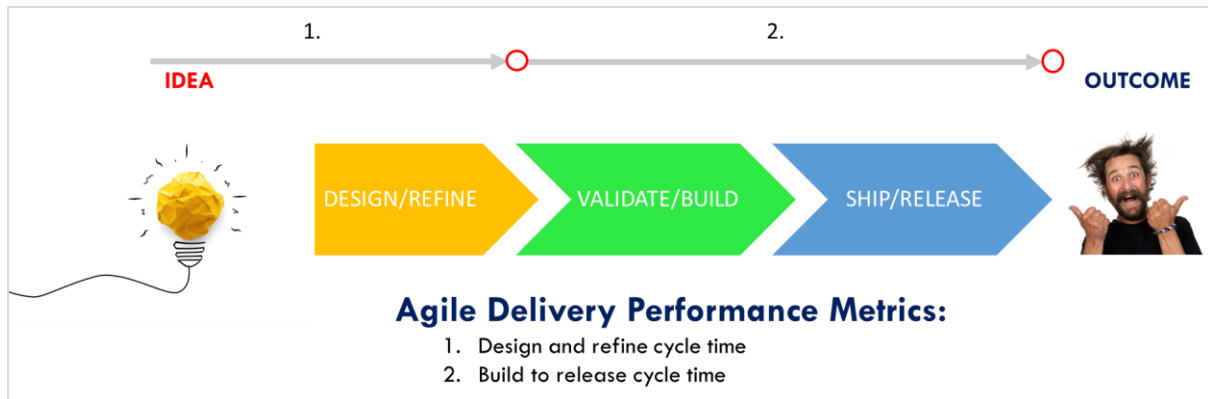
1. **Design and refine cycle time:** how long does it take to process a "raw" idea, refine it and get it ready to build? It is often better to quickly test and validate or dismiss an idea then have a prolonged time considering its merit.

2. **Build to release cycle time:** how long does it take to validate and build a solution to an idea after it is refined? Usually this is the least problematic phase of the system, but it is still important to collect the data.

Agile Delivery Performance Metrics:
3. End-to-end lead time
4. End-to-end lead time variance (delivery predictability)

3. **End-to-end lead time:** how long does it take to move a "raw" idea, refine it, get it ready to build, then build and ship it? This is an important metric as it provides an indication on how long the learning loops are for the Agile delivery system. What I mean by this is if it takes 200 working days to ship an averaged sized 'idea' and get an outcome, then this is how long you need to wait to find out if the idea is actually valuable. If another organisation has a shorter learning loop than your organisation then it is fair to say that they are learning faster than your organisation and innovating more quickly (and winning more customers if competing with you).

4. **End-to-end lead time variance (delivery predictability):** how much variation is there is the end-to-end lead time? This metric is important because it allows delivery teams to make and keep their promises on when work will be complete for their internal or external customers. With high variance nobody has confidence that the Agile delivery system will be on time in meeting commitments made.

Four more (equally important) measures

5. **Process efficiency:** how much of the cycle time or lead time is taken up with people waiting for others to do their task? Efficiency equals value adding activity time over total time (value adding activity plus waiting time between activities).

6. **Release frequency:** how often does the Agile delivery system deliver value to its customers/clients. Often teams will be doing Agile ceremonies and using all the language but only shipping their work (delivering value) every 4 months in big batch releases. Ultimately it is impossible to call yourself an Agile team if you don't ship work frequently (at least every 2-3 weeks). Shipping frequently also enables faster learning loops.

7. **Agile delivery workforce engagement (happiness and satisfaction):** there are many ways to measure it, but it all means the same thing; are the people in the Agile delivery system happy whilst at work? A high-performance Agile delivery system does not sacrifice its people to improve process measures.

8. **Key results from delivered work:** finally, it is important to measure and monitor the impact of delivered work on the operations of your organisation. A high-performing Agile delivery system delivers valuable outcomes (however you define value). This could mean social outcomes if you are a not for profit or financial returns or customer acquisition if you are a commercial company.

Some additional delivery performance metrics for DevOps

Delivering software solutions has some specific metrics that only apply in that context. I didn't want technology execs and specialists reading this and being disappointed that I left out some very basic standard metrics that help measure software delivery performance. In addition to the metrics already mentioned devops would also include:

Change failure rate: For the primary application or service being worked on, what percentage of changes to production or releases to users result in degraded service (for example, lead to service impairment or service outage) and subsequently require remediation.

Mean time to recover: For the primary application or service being worked on, how long does it generally take to restore service when a service incident or a defect that impacts users occurs (for example, unplanned outage, service impairment).

Source: dora.dev

Final thoughts / conclusion

I would strongly encourage organisations to design in from the start the ability to collect data on Agile delivery performance.

By adopting Agile with the means to assess delivery performance you will come prepared with data to back up your opinion when an executive sponsor needs to be convinced on the benefits of pushing ahead with an Agile change program.

Having a quality system to collect and use Agile delivery performance data helps organisations track the impact of change as it is introduced. By doing this we avoid the challenges of unaccountable Agile coaches, under-performing/half-adopted frameworks whilst also winning over the hearts and minds of the people who have traditionally managed delivery (the PMO and project professionals).

Take the Next Step in Improving Your Agile Delivery Performance

Agile promises better ways of working, but achieving and proving high performance remains a challenge for many organisations. The key lies in the right enablement activities, governance practices, and data-driven decision-making.

At Source Agility, we specialise in helping organisations optimise Agile delivery—providing the frameworks, metrics, and expertise needed to unlock smoother, faster, and more predictable outcomes.

If you're ready to take control of your Agile delivery performance, let's have a conversation.

📅 **Book a call** with the author of this paper, Niall McShane to explore how we can help you apply these insights to your organisation. **Book a meeting here.**

📩 Or **reach out** to discuss how you can start making measurable improvements today. Email Niall at **niall@sourceagility.com.au**