CRITICALEYE

The peer to peer Board Community

Agile by Design

Traditional businesses can apply some of the principles of agile working by changing aspects of their built environment. **Mary-Anne Baldwin** examines how

Traditionally the secret weapon of Silicon Valley stars, agile working is of increasing interest to other businesses that are looking to increase innovation and collaboration. Thankfully, even subtle changes to the built environment can allow conventional companies to apply some of agile's principles.

To some, agile working is synonymous with flexible hours and working from home but it's much more than that. Seven-year-old snack company, Graze, which has about 500 employees, has always applied the principles of agile working in some form or another.

Its CEO, **Anthony Fletcher**, explains: "What we're talking about here is a project management methodology whereby senior managers create an environment where they don't need to meddle and in which unusual teams are brought together for short periods of time, away from the weekly cadence. I am genuinely impressed; the quality of the work is higher and the consumer is taken more into account."

One aspect of agile's myriad facets is the squad or scrum, a team of about eight people who work together on a very focused short-term project. Some

are cross-functional, housing people with varied roles and expertise across the business.

"For traditional businesses, working cross-functionally and talking to other teams mainly involves booking a meeting or dropping by someone's desk and asking for their views. I think the advantage of agile is that it's a much more intense, frequent and iterative conversation," says **Anthony**.

Graze had great success asking a team to look at early customer retention, says **Edd Read**, the company's co-founder and >

Chief Technology Officer. "They found that a large number of customers leave the service within 24 hours of joining. What we saw by mixing up the team was that, emotionally, they really got under the skin of why people might do this. They were incredibly empowered to look really carefully at that bit of the customer experience and they made some really amazing improvements to it," says **Edd**.

Having already applied agile to its tech and product development functions, **Anthony** is now considering adoption on a wider scale. "What's got us a bit intrigued at Graze is how else we can use it," he says.

Graze isn't the only one examining the full extent of agile's benefits, as **Edd** explains: "A fantastic example of agile being deployed in an environment where you'd traditionally think it was impossible is the Government Digital Service." The GDS, which leads the UK Governments' internal digital transformation, adopted an agile approach in 2012 when modernising its Business Link Website, which offers advice to UK companies. It gave a one-off saving of £6 million. "It was at that point that several other Government departments bought into it," **Edd** explains.

Sam Bunting, Partner at PA Consulting Group and an expert in agile transformation, explains that many big businesses are following suit. "I talk to most of the leading banks in the world on a monthly basis and literally all of them are rolling out agile to some degree. These include the likes of HSBC, Citigroup, Barclays, Deutsche Bank," he explains.

"One of the top five global banks is rolling out agile across its entire organisation

> **" One of the top five global banks is rolling out agile across its entire organisation "**

from the CEO down. It's changing the way it does finance, the way it does internal audits, everything."

The Architecture of Innovation

No matter how successful, individual squads cannot lead a revolution – they must be brought together. This is where the built environment plays a crucial role and it's where any organisation can get involved.

Breakout or 'huddle' rooms, walls you can write on and movable partitions that create spaces to suit your needs, not only provide the environment for teams to come together but embody the fluid and informal approach of agile working.

When Veolia Water Technologies moved from its old HQ, it took the opportunity to create a built environment that supports staff integration and innovation. **Beverley Eagle**, Head of HR for the Solutions & Technologies businesses within Veolia UK, says: "We decided we wanted an agile building and flexibility in the way that we worked. It had to be 21st Century-proofed. It had to be a place where we could come together and have fun – that was a key part of it."

Having now relocated, **Beverley** reflects on the benefits of the environment.

She says: "People much prefer the space – they work together better; it's increased efficiencies and improved relationships. We can produce cross-functional teams very quickly."

One aspect of the new built environment is a secret breakout room, the door to which is hidden within the wall. "It is a space that is fundamentally different to the rest of the organisation and it's there to help people think differently," she explains. "It's an area to come together, to play games, but also where people can be innovative."

The built environment is likewise important to Graze, which has a white-board walled innovation room in its factory and social areas in its Richmond office that includes a pool table.

Creating such spaces allows new and unexpected teams to form naturally, whereas defined areas can support defined teams.

"One of the things we've learnt is that teams work a lot better when they can have a bit of a space that is theirs to really occupy for the duration of the project. It's almost like an extension of the team's collective brain," says **Anthony**.

Edd goes on to explain that as each new team at Graze forms, its members decide a project name and hang it above their space. "Suddenly, it's a cool thing to be part of. There's something about the identity of sitting down with other people, putting a flag above your desk and going: 'We're here and we're going to do this'," he says.

Yet you don't need a separate room for each project, nor do you need to move ›

to bigger premises – it's about using the environment you've got more efficiently and intuitively.

"We decided the role of the head office is not what it was a few years ago; we didn't need a big corporate space because people could work remotely," says **Beverley**. "We dropped our space by about a third.

"We also mapped the process of the organisation so that our teams were sat in that order – that improved communication."

Another way in which Veolia saved space was by doing away with separate offices for each manager. Now, only one VP has an office and even that is used as a meeting room when available.

Scrapping offices for senior staff supports another agile principle, that

<div style="background:#eee">

GLOSSARY

Cross functional team
A group of individuals with different expertise but one common goal.

Squad or Scrum
A small team of about eight people usually tasked with one project. In some cases this is headed by a squad leader but these teams should be autonomous.

Huddle Rooms
Collaboration rooms used to form innovative ideas. The walls are often whiteboards on which the team write their ideas.

Holacracy
A method that removes management hierarchy and distributes it across roles to support autonomous working. This method is structured by a clear set of rules, responsibilities and processes.

</div>

of holacracy – the re-distribution of power and the dissolution of formal hierarchy; everyone works together and shares ideas in an open and flat structure.

Room of One's Own

While open plan spaces are the plat du jour, not everyone's convinced. **Jonathan Baker**, Principle Consultant at PA Consulting Group, who specialises in agile mindsets, explains: "Many people are huge fans of open spaces but agile teams can get very loud and argumentative – it's a family, so they go through the emotional gambit together. We try to emphasise a semi-open space where you have teams that can work together collaboratively, yet not be disruptive to others."

He described how one business he worked with – a top five pharmaceutical company – used an agile approach in a complex drugs trial process, allowing it to bring a job to market two years sooner and saving billions of pounds.

"The technology department leveraged smarter devices and ways of working to drive further collaboration. For example, they used smart whiteboards that transmitted what people were writing across different regions. They had open rooms that people could come into at any point of the day, talk into a monitor and link up with agile teams working across different locations. Of course, one could tap into these from home as well, says **Jonathon**.

His colleague **Sam** adds: "A lot of people completely misunderstand agile as meaning you need to be physically with each other, but you don't. With the right technology, which is a critical part

of the agile working space, you can enable all sorts of collaborative working."

The key principles of agile project management are collaboration, fluidity and creativity, but it is very much up to the individual organisation how it chooses to implement those elements. Often it's a learning process that will take time – and a bit of staff feedback – to perfect.

"There's absolutely no doubt that an organisation has to find its way and sometimes it could take a couple of failures to really take a look at those things," says **Anthony**. "In retrospect, it's obvious there are principles that we've violated that resulted in us making mistakes. But we're proud of the fact that we've really learned from those projects and it's really helping us work a lot better now.

"I believe we're going to use agile much more and we're going to come up with our own version of it." ■

<div style="background:#eee">

Featuring Commentary From:

Jonathan Baker
Principle Consultant
PA Consulting Group

Sam Bunting
Partner
PA Consulting Group

Beverley Eagle
Head of HR, Solutions
& Technologies
Veolia UK

Anthony Fletcher
CEO
Graze

Edd Read
Chief Technology Officer
Graze

Contact the contributors through:
www.criticaleye.com

</div>

@ Email   in Share   Tweet