AgileSparks

RAPID RTC

Moving into the fast lane with SAFe®

RAPID RTC delivers market-leading, proprietary software solutions to several verticals including the automotive and agriculture sectors that enable comprehensive lead management and lead generation through real-time customer conversations via its Lead Manager, Chat, and Text products.

From its inception in 1996, the company has grown to over 275 employees that serve and support more than 2,500 clients in 30 countries. With its headquarters at the University of Manitoba's SmartPark Innovation Hub in Winnipeg, Canada, the company also has offices in Toronto, London, Paris and Dallas.

The Challenge

RAPID RTC is a successful company that was poised for continued expansion and growth. It had goals to enter new markets and had interest from customers in new verticals. But the company's evolution had revealed challenges that were impeding its ability to fully capitalize on the opportunities.

The company's CTO, Keith Meyer, sums up the core issues at that time as follows:

Too much time estimating and prioritizing. "We'd have a plan," states Meyer, "and very shortly a new request would come in, which would be characterized as urgent, that would throw us into re-planning mode to provide new estimates and priority of work."

Lost momentum. Development team members would start working on one thing, an urgent request would come in, they would drop what they were doing to address that work, and then have to regroup to go back to the original work.

Decision-making inefficiencies. "We had a lot of handoffs to vet decisions. It would take days to get approval, which slowed everything up," states Meyer.

Products consistently took longer to release and cost more than expected. Combined with the above issues, products were becoming more complex as more features were added, and testing took longer to complete to deliver those products at the company's standards.

The Tipping Point

To improve the company's deployment and scalability, senior management decided to adopt service-oriented architecture (SOA) using microservices and messaging for its latest product. This intended move cast the company's challenges in stark relief. Design work by senior development staff estimated that this revolutionary product would require 18 months of work by multiple developers, project managers, and quality assurance specialists consuming nearly 100,000 hours of labor.

Meyer and his colleagues were concerned about a delivery deadline so far in the future given the uncertainty in technology and architecture. Therefore, the company decided to get outside SOA help to review the architecture with the team. That process led to an examination of the organizational processes and procedures that were getting in its way. After consulting with several colleagues in various markets, RAPID RTC decided that to move forward and stay competitive it was time to leave its largely waterfall development structure behind for an Agile framework that could scale.

AgileSparks Solutions

RAPID RTC was experiencing some of the classic product development challenges. What was encouraging was their level of commitment to invest in real change. "We always ask people why they want to implement Agile to make sure that the reasons relate to business agility rather than simply getting an Agile *certificate of completion*," states AgileSparks senior consultant, Yuval Yeret.

RAPID RTC engaged AgileSparks in May 2018 and together with Yeret, their Agile coach, they undertook the following:

Leading SAFe workshop + Implementation Strategy Workshop with the leaders of the Product Development organization.

Design and launch of an Agile Release Train (ART), including the following key activities:

- Navigating the switch to Agile teams
- Identifying team-level and program-level roles *(Scrum Masters, Product Owners, Product Management, Release Train Engineers)*
- SAFe Product Owners/Managers course
- SAFe for Teams course
- Program Increment Planning

Timeline: 5 months

"We did a lot of research before deciding to transition to the SAFe framework. We chose AgileSparks to guide our process because a trusted colleague and local leader in the Agile space said they would deliver excellence and they did."

— **Keith Meyer, CTO RAPID RTC**

Results

Significant improvements in time-to-market. What would have taken multiple quarters to get to market previously can be done in a single Program Increment (PI) by using the concept of minimal viable product (MVP).

The ability to monetize product development is faster due to the alignment of sales, marketing, and product management processes in the planning stage.

The level of staff engagement and satisfaction is deeper, and the increased energy level on the floor is palpable. Many team members state they feel empowered.

Because everyone has participated in creating the business objectives, **everyone is invested and working together** to achieve them. Even with the demands of growth, product quality remains high. Meyer reports that it's starting to feel like a well-oiled machine.

"I worked at RAPID RTC for about five years before we transitioned to SAFe. It was always an excellent place to work with a positive environment, but I was enthusiastic about the change, and many of the other developers were too. We were excited about the prospect of doing things in a more agile way. We knew there were inefficiencies in our processes and wanted that to improve. There's no question the shift was disruptive, and we're still evolving, but it's deeply satisfying to be part of creating something new, having everyone working towards the same goal and sharing success together."

— **Steven Sawa, SOFTWARE DEVELOPER**

How RAPID RTC Did It

Testing the Agile Waters

Before committing to SAFe, RAPID RTC's senior management decided to adopt Agile in small pockets. Implementing Scrum and Kanban scenarios at the team level allowed them to test the Agile waters and was useful as a demonstration to others in the organization that the framework could work.

One of the hazards RAPID RTC wanted to avoid in the adoption of Agile was what AgileSparks refers to as *Agile Theatre*—where some practices are implemented and others are not or where some parts of the organization are left out. From the research Meyer and other senior management had undertaken, partial implementation is what destined many organizations to abandon the attempt to go Agile. They had to go all in.

The AgileSparks coach began his work with RAPID RTC with a thorough examination of the company's business and organizational structure, allowing him to tailor training and the approach to transition for best results. "This introductory time really helped prepare us for what was to come," states Meyer, "Our coach came to understand our culture and what we were trying to achieve."

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Foundational Event

The foundational event on RAPID RTC's transition to Agile was the implementation strategy workshop held with the company's senior management. This workshop included a Leading SAFe class followed by an implementation workshop.

AgileSparks recommends the Implementation Strategy Workshop for all of its SAFe engagements. It goes beyond formal training and starts with identifying specific pains, context, and goals of the organization with a focus on how to implement the learning and drive the change.

"Because our coach took the time to really understand our company, it enabled us to have the right people to participate in the course," states Meyer. For example, the organization's CEO and several board members attended, which Meyer

believes was critical to get buy-in and support for what was going to be a profound organizational change.

Following the workshop, senior management took the time to prep the teams for what was to come before taking those next steps. "We felt it was important not to move too quickly in our transition," states Meyer, "I compare it to cracking an egg— you don't want to swing it too quickly, but if you don't swing it hard enough it won't break. It's a balance."

Some organizations start an Agile transformation including only R&D and engineering in the room. An Agile transformation, especially at scale, is a business transformation so, it requires all the relevant players represented. Without this, the transition is jeopardized because of ignorance or even active resistance due to lack of understanding and involvement in designing the change.

Reorganized Teams

Next steps included the SAFe Product Owners / Product Managers course, which included the Product team, intended Product Owners from the R&D organization as well as the company's Scrum Masters to ensure they were well versed in SAFe practices too.

At this point, the company was ready for its first major move in its transition. At the time, teams had been organized according to products, which led to teams of disparate sizes and skill sets. The company reorganized into cross-disciplinary Agile teams with a features focus. In addition to development staff, each team now had a Scrum Master, Product Owner and QA staff. This reorganization allowed teams to act autonomously and provided them with the ability to implement any feature spread across the teams.

"We did the reorganization before fully implementing SAFe," explains Meyer, "to allow the team structure to gel and for

Prioritizing Work

In parallel, another key preparation activity was the creation of a Program Backlog for the Agile Release Train. Figuring out what features to build that would deliver the highest strategic and business value involved RAPID RTC's product managers, business leadership, architecture team, finance, sales, and marketing. Central to this prioritization was the evaluation of the cost to delay each feature alongside keeping options open rather than squeezing in every possible day of effort. This meant learning to say, "no" or "not now" to some business opportunities in order to create a focused Program Backlog that leaves some room to adjust course based on future developments.

The Agile Release Train (ART)

With the prioritization process complete, the organization was ready to take on its first Program Increment (PI) planning session. The session involves all areas of the organization involved in delivery, sales, and distribution of products (called the Agile Release Train) coming together for two days to plan

In preparation for the launch of the Agile Release Train (explained in the ART section), AgileSparks includes an exercise during the SAFe for Teams workshop where everyone identifies the risks involved with the transformation. Using a participatory prioritization technique (The 25/10 Liberating Structure), the group can define the top risks. Everyone feels engaged and involved and what results is clarity about what the transformation team needs to focus on (In this case, the ability to continuously integrate and test).

team members to get used to working with each other." We also did considerable work coordinating new processes between the product management and sales teams.

Next, all development staff participated in the SAFe for Teams two-day workshop where the new teams had a further opportunity to connect while learning about Agile, SAFe, and preparing to work in the new Agile process.

RAPID RTC demonstrates how an organization can achieve predictability and productivity balanced with business agility using SAFe (think of the SAFe principle assume variability; preserve options). Yes, there is a need for a product roadmap, but that must be balanced with the ability to turn on a dime and change plans, even during a Program Increment.

An Agile Release Train should have the capability of reprioritizing features from Sprint to Sprint. RAPID RTC is implementing practices such as limiting features in process and PI Stretch Objectives to give them this competitive edge.

what work will be delivered in the next quarter (called the Program Increment). "Dedicating this amount of time involving more than 100 staff with no development activities on the agenda reaffirmed the importance of getting buy-in to SAFe

The Agile Release Train (ART) cont.

across the organization," states Meyer. Just before the PI Planning session, AgileSparks delivered an Agile training day for RAPID RTC's sales leadership team. This was an opportunity to orient the sales organization to the new way of operating and to prepare them to be effective stakeholders for the ART. Some of the discussions revolved around the new approach to prioritization, building a roadmap, balancing predictability and commitment versus agility, and the impact of this new process on the sales process.

"Our AgileSparks coach attended our first PI Planning session, but we ran it," states Meyer. "It was a bit of chaos, but it was organized chaos, and we were successful in getting everyone's input and agreement on the plan." Meyer states their coach did provide light consultation along the way and most importantly, gave them a sense of security knowing if they

ran into trouble expertise was at hand. The autonomy this process gave to the teams left members feeling a sense of control over the work they had to accomplish for that quarter. Everyone in the organization was on board and aligned.

The transition to Agile was underway.

> The Agile for Sales workshop goes beyond the by-the-book SAFe Implementation Roadmap. AgileSparks recommends adding this complementary step to the Agile Release Train Launch. Real Agile transformation will have an impact on the sales organization for a product. If an organization thinks it won't have an impact it's a sign of being on the way to *Agile Theatre*—an approach that goes through the motions but doesn't impact the way the business operates.

How Things Look Now

RAPID RTC has made a remarkable transformation. In 2018 it was an organization looking for ways to keep up with its growth and business opportunities due to challenges resulting from a waterfall development approach. Over that pivotal year, the company changed its team structure, development language, methodology, and deployment strategy.

Self-organized, cross-disciplinary teams now deliver potentially releasable product increments in two-week Sprints based on the work and priorities decided across the organization each quarter during its two-day Program Increment Planning session.

Remaining Challenges

"As an organization, we're still getting used to fluid product delivery dates and learning how to manage that alongside some of our deliverables that are fixed time and fixed scope," states Meyer. He goes on to say that although they are working to minimize these items, he doesn't expect to eliminate them. "I'd say we are on the spectrum of continuous integration and

delivery, but our fixed deliverables reveal that we have some maturity to gain here." Meyer says one of the benefits of their transition is the increased visibility of existing challenges and a willingness to invest the attention and resources to improve in this area.

Another issue the company needs to address is getting new employees on board. "We'll be sending one of our employees to SAFe Program Consultant Trainer (SPCT) training in the next couple of months," states Meyer.

Final Reflections

Meyer and his colleagues feel good about RAPID RTC's transition process and its pace:

"AgileSparks gave us the foundation to help us mature as a company. In business, a company continually evolves to meet new challenges but over the years, our development and product management processes became bloated, cumbersome, and we could feel the nimbleness slowly eroding away. We needed a way to involve multiple stakeholders and provide accountability to each other to create a unified path forward that was responsive to our customers. Make no mistake, Agile is not a pill that makes everything perfect overnight. It takes time and applied commitment from every level of the company but if the commitment is there, I can't speak enough about the results I have witnessed."
—Glen Demetrioff, President & CEO

"The initial Program Increment planning session exceeded my expectations on a number of levels. The collaborative work among the teams was well coordinated and the team members were engaged throughout the two-day session.

In addition, numerous participants from various departments commented on how valuable they found the product strategy presentations and the design discussions throughout the session.

The return on investment in the SAFe Agile process has been recouped by RAPID RTC in a very short period of time in the increased level of engagement and commitment among the company's staff and the improved level of awareness and efficiency in the overall product design and development process."
—Dr. Mark Evans, Board Member

"Our AgileSparks coach was a good fit for us because he was attentive and available but had a hands-off style that allowed us to own the process. The experience felt very much tailored specifically to us which greatly contributed to the resounding success of the implementation."
—Keith Meyer, CTO

RECOMMENDATIONS

Keith Meyer's recommendations to organizations starting the transition to Agile:

- Have executives and CEO part of the first Leading Agile training session.
- Undertake Agile for Teams and training for sales well in advance of the PI Planning session.
- Involve the entire development team in the decision whether or not to implement feature teams to ensure buy-in.
- Find a formula for calculating product business value (e.g. Weighted Shortest Job First - WSJF) that aligns with your organization's business strategy.

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— Keith Meyer, CTO RAPID RTC

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