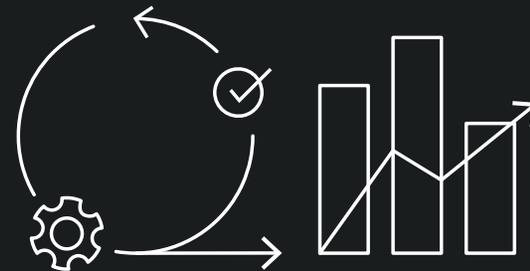
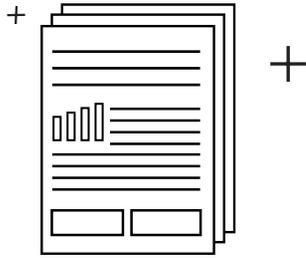


3 Essentials of Applying Agile to Speed Up Your Data Projects

How to use agile practices to quicken your pace of data change.



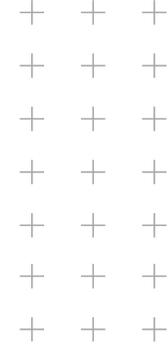


This “cheat sheet” is designed for enterprise leaders and data practitioners who are interested in the meaningful, predictable, and repeatable progress on data projects; it’s meant to help you better understand where to focus your efforts to speed up and de-risk your projects.

Companies are spending huge sums to transform their data technology and processes, but for many, the benefits have been limited.

According to [Harvard Business Review](#), less than 10% of companies have exploited data value across their organization. You simply cannot invest in new data technology or infrastructure and expect results to happen.

It’s necessary to incorporate an agile approach in your data projects in order to move quickly, prove ROI, and change the way in which you leverage data — not just the way you build technology.



First Things First!

Agile should be a flexible framework your team uses that fits your unique organization.

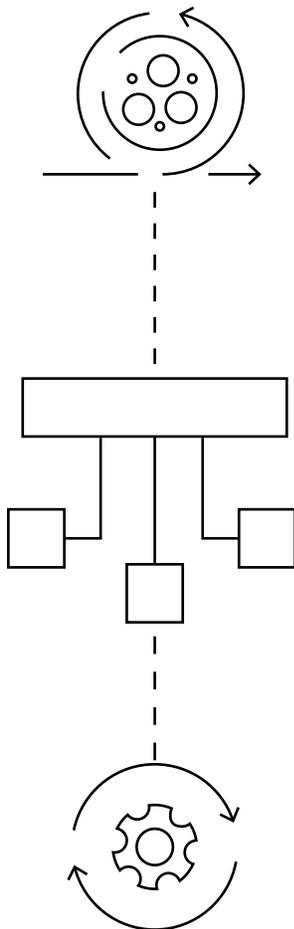
Agile can and should be used to quicken the pace of your data projects, but we also want to stress that you and your team shouldn't lean so far into agile that you become constrained by its rules. Understand that agile is a set of guiding principles, not necessarily requirements you must rigidly adhere to. Create an agile process that is uniquely suited to your needs and the individuals on your team.

Additionally, don't overlook buy-in for your new process. It's a critical box that must be checked in order for your team to have autonomy and make decisions on their own instead of waiting for approval. Without this, there's the potential for silos and critical parts of your project being held up.

What You Can Do

Learn about and leverage the fundamentals of agile — and bring others alongside you while you form a version that best serves the team.

We've provided a few of the core principles of agile here that are most relevant to data initiatives. Use this as your starting point, but share learnings and form your team's unique ways of working alongside your cross-functional group.



STEP 01

Establish and empower a small, cross-functional team that can make decisions and work autonomously

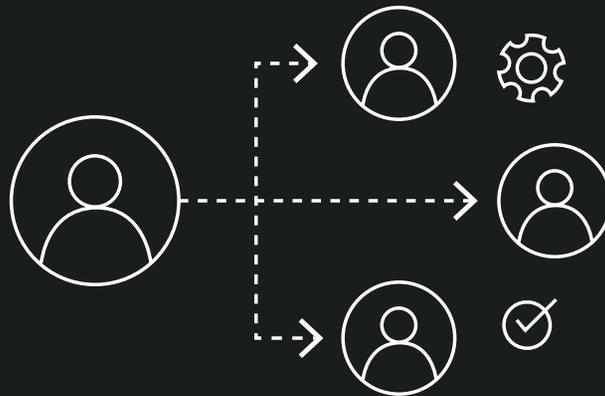


*Treating data as a discipline
Strong cross-functional
teams enable a higher
velocity on initiatives and
ownership of outcomes,
which are both key to an
effective Agile strategy.*

*Mason McClelland
Director, Strategy
RevUnit*

How to do it

- 01** _ Identify who needs to be on your small, cross-functional team, including people from business, IT, data, and product (depending on your company structure).
- 02** _ Empower delegates (those who can dedicate themselves to the work and have the autonomy to make decisions) not just diplomats (those who represent their function's perspective).



PRO TIP 01:

Identify and Empower Delegates to Take Action and Move Forward on Data Projects

Simply keeping stakeholders informed is not enough. We consider these people “diplomats”. While diplomats may be able to give an opinion or represent a function of the business, they aren’t empowered to actually affect the outcome of the work being done. When bringing people into your cross-functional team, you need delegates, not just diplomats. “Delegates” are individuals who are dedicated to the work that is being carried out, and they can make adjustments or add new work in response to developments in the project.

Delegates are vital to your cross-functional team; you will need the political buy-in for your team to make decisions on their own. Waiting for approval or removal of red tape outside of your cross-functional team can substantially slow down progress. So make sure you not only have the right people, but that those people also have the autonomy to make calls on the work being done.



STEP 02

Work in quick, iterative cycles that allow you to “fail forward” and speed up your data initiative



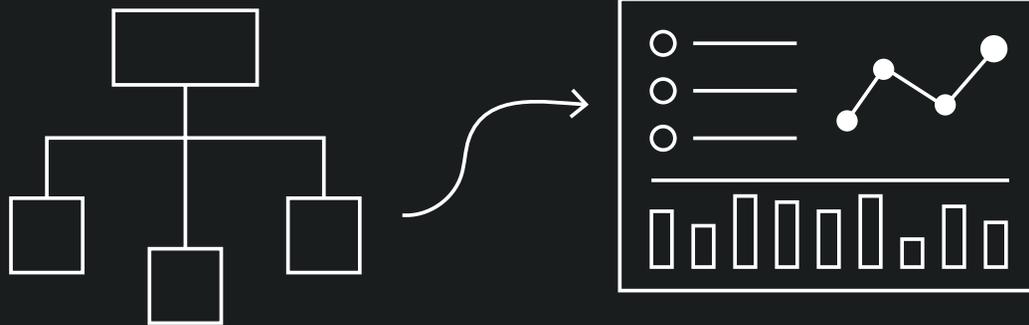
Working in iterative cycles is the single best thing you can do to delight customers and de-risk your product.

*Doug Mitchell
VP, Delivery
RevUnit*

How to do it

- 01_ Define your MVD (minimum viable data) by asking yourself, “What does the first success look like?”
- 02_ Take small steps to fail fast, working in sprints.
- 03_ Work from a backlog of work, prioritizing what will help you get your solution into the hands of users faster.





PRO TIP 02:

Start with a Pilot Project to Prove Value

Start with a pilot project to prove out your concept and gather buy-in before you begin. Keep things simple and contained by beginning with one set of source data, building only one model, and choosing one report to tackle first.



STEP 03

Take time to understand the ultimate users of your data and involve them in the process

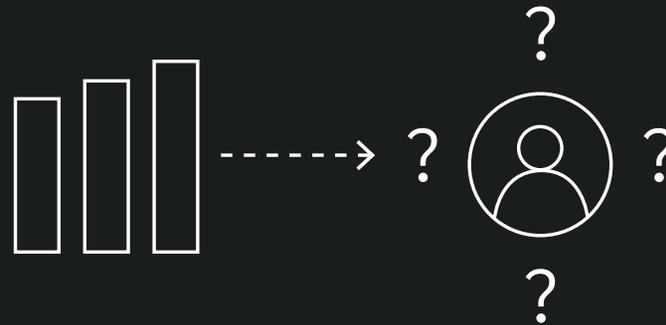


It is prudent to know and understand the objectives and needs of those using your data, for it to be of any real use. The more focused you are around specific user objectives, the better decision making you enable for both them and their organization.

Corey Campbell
Creative Director
RevUnit

How to do it

- 01_ Define your data users by understanding everyone that will be impacted by your solution (look downstream from just the core users).
- 02_ Understand their needs, goals, and tasks through interviews and real-world observations.
- 03_ Build and iterate to their needs, asking for their feedback through the entire process.



PRO TIP 03:

Use the “jobs to be done” framework to understand what your users need from your data

A great place to start is by leveraging the “jobs to be done” framework specific to your data users. This framework is an effective tool, especially when it comes to data solutions because it centers around the tasks and goals your users need to accomplish when using the data. And yes, you are wading into the territory of UX (user experience) design. Its role in data work is often overlooked, but it’s the lynchpin to your data project’s success — whether you call it design or not.

In this framework, the goal is to discover and understand a user’s specific “job to be done” in a given circumstance and the thought processes that would cause a customer to “hire” your solution to complete the job. For your team, developing this understanding is more important than user characteristics, or product features, and focusing on it helps to better align your solution with what your users really need.

By communicating with and understanding your users through this process, you gain a deeper understanding of the “job”, allowing you to innovate your offering without the guesswork of what trade-offs your users will tolerate. The last element of this framework is how your team integrates its processes across functions to aid the job being done. Having your team all focus on the “job” brings them into cohesion and provides for clear guidance of what they need to do to continue to support the “job to be done”.

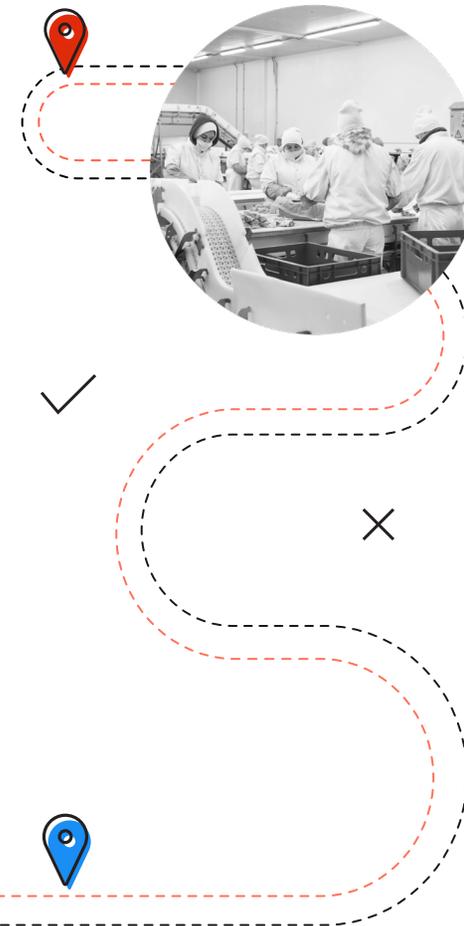
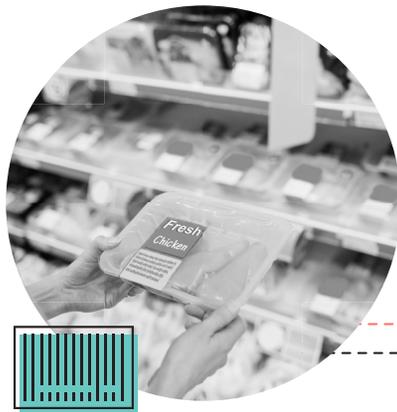


AGILE DATA IN THE WILD

A large food processor was losing millions of dollars annually on lost inventory due to an existing inefficient system that was overly manual and error-prone. They needed help redesigning the process to more accurately identify and sort products on the production line.

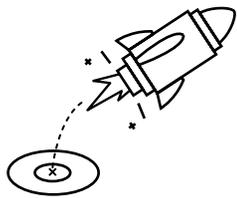
Our cross-functional team determined a machine learning model would help improve product identification accuracy. We started small, with manually-validated training sets that were tested quickly to determine an appropriate machine learning model. When we got the model to a high accuracy, we slowly scaled the model to reach the real-world levels of data it needed to process.

By employing MVD and iterative cycles, we had a functioning model at more than 90% accuracy in under a month.



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This “cheat sheet” is simply a starting point to help you begin to take legitimate action toward improving the quality and efficiency of your data project execution. Clearly, there’s a lot more to consider and dive into about the agile process beyond what we’ve listed here. So, we’ve included a few additional resources below where you can find more detailed information to help you gain better control of your data projects.

Wrapping Up

What to Take Away From This Cheat Sheet



Establish and empower a small, cross-functional team that can make decisions and work autonomously.



Work in quick, iterative cycles that allow you to “fail forward” and speed up your data initiative.



Take time to understand the ultimate users of your data and involve them in the process.



Additional Resources



QUICK-START GUIDE

Building a Report People *Actually* Use →

Visit the link above to view the latest in our “quick-start” series. Learn more about what you can do to better determine what data your decision makers need when, and how best to deliver it on your presentation tool.



QUICK-START GUIDE

Improving Data Quality for Better Decision-Making →

Visit the link above to view another installment in our “quick-start” series. Learn more about the five things every enterprise leader should be thinking about right now in order to make the critical transition into an even more competitive, data-driven environment.



VIDEO

Applying Agile Principles to Your Data Initiative | Data Changemakers →

Watch the Narrative Science video above as Doug Mitchell, Director of Client Experience at RevUnit, shares best practices of applying agile principles to data work for some of the world's largest organizations to create change, faster.

Need help getting started?

If you don't disrupt your own organization, someone else will. Using startup frameworks, we can help you leverage your data to drive new revenue opportunities, innovations in technology, or even new business models.

[Retail Data Lab](#) →

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RevUnit is a data technology studio.

We help enterprise teams create change with their data, faster, by applying agile product principles to their data systems.

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