MCAP

MCAP is one of Canada's largest independent mortgage financing companies, with over $61 billion in assets under administration. The company operates in two key lines of business: residential mortgages and commercial mortgages & development finance.

Comprised of 700 employees in 9 offices, MCAP originates, securitizes, trades and services mortgages across Canada. With a stable of more than 25 institutional investors and over 200,000 borrowers, MCAP has the flexibility and expertise to create innovative financial products to match the needs of both borrowers and investors. MCAP truly means "One Stop Shopping" for all aspects of real estate lending.

The Business Need

MCAP has a high percentage of IT staff who are knowledgeable about the business, eager to work closely with business partners, and do whatever it takes to be successful together. Due to geographic distribution of business partners in Toronto and Vancouver, IT staff in Kitchener and Toronto, and a waterfall-like development methodology, requirements processes were fragile. Communication was a challenge, increasing project risk. Development timelines were long, and quality suffered. Test processes were weak and lacked sufficient, automated regression tests. Due to insufficient monitoring, production problem-detection was difficult.

MCAP was already making changes to improve its operational infrastructure and had begun investing in test automation. Everyone understood they needed to change their delivery approach.

The Solution

In late 2014, MCAP engaged Scott Ambler + Associates (SA+A) to assess its current IT solution delivery practices and create a roadmap for agile transformation. SA+A recommended streamlining the requirements-gathering process by introducing the Product Owner role to IT delivery teams, training and coaching teams in Disciplined Agile, investing in test
automation throughout the delivery lifecycle, visualizing ongoing work at the team and portfolio level, and piloting a lean lifecycle for smaller change requests.

MCAP offered 3-day Disciplined Agile Delivery Experience workshops (DA 101) to delivery teams, led by SA + A instructors, 1-day Disciplined Agile Delivery workshops (DA 103) to executives, and employed an on-site, agile coach to help roll out the new approach on two critical projects.

MCAP co-located IT delivery team members with Product Owners from the business. The Disciplined Agile Inception, Construction, and Transition phase goals and Ongoing goals guided teams as they customized their delivery processes according to the need. MCAP asked teams to identify and implement small, incremental process improvements, using retrospectives to explore what was working well and what they could do better.

MCAP now has rolled out the Disciplined Agile Delivery (DAD) process decision framework to more than six delivery teams.

The Benefit

Product Owners report that stakeholder feedback is very positive. Stakeholder engagement has improved because they realize the impact their timely feedback has. Stakeholders are happier with the business value that solution teams deliver.

Team members report improved communication, trust, participation, and teamwork; when a person is falling behind, other team members step in to help. The team dynamic is stronger. There’s a better sense that together the team succeeds or fails.

Teams deliver more value because their members focus on smaller, high-priority requirements in each two-week iteration and demonstrate working, potentially consumable solutions, thereby obtaining stakeholder feedback. Documentation has been reduced by collaboratively modelling requirements on team room whiteboards. Deployments to production have gone smoothly and quality is higher because of these changes.

“Over time we will use the agile approach on all our new initiatives. IT working hand in hand with the business units will become a natural part of our day to day activities. More automation will be in place, which will allow us to use our human resources for what they are best at, thinking and finding better solutions. It’s a culture change and the change will take time to adopt and integrate in all that we do. We are ramping up slowly with a few projects and building incrementally on our successes and lessons learned.”

—Derek Norton, CEO, MCAP

The Approach

Assess Organization

Disciplined Agile is a pragmatic approach to adopting agile at scale in an enterprise. Context counts, so a fundamental aspect of the framework is to adapt processes to the situation at hand. SA+A spent three days assessing the existing processes at MCAP and produced a roadmap of short-term and long-term recommendations to guide transforming the organization from a traditional, waterfall-based solution delivery approach to a Disciplined Agile model.

Train Delivery Teams and Business Partners

By February 2015, 31 IT and business team members had completed the 3-day Disciplined Agile Delivery Experience workshop. Training continued throughout 2015 and by year-end over 65 IT and business people had completed the 3-day workshop, and 12 business leaders had completed the executive workshop.
Create Collaborative Work Environments

In the first quarter of 2015, MCAP invested in two new team rooms in which team members work shoulder-to-shoulder and optimize face-to-face communication. Now MCAP has six agile delivery teams and four team rooms, with more on the way. By rotating operations team members through the agile delivery teams and creating a single, prioritized work item list of operational issues and new requirements, MCAP was able to align and integrate the demands of production support with the development of new product features and functionality.

Reflect on and Measure Progress

Delivery teams hold periodic retrospective meetings to openly and transparently celebrate what’s going well, discuss potential improvements, and identify what teams have learned that they can share with the broader organization. MCAP asked SA+A to conduct yearly “health checks” to measure how well teams are achieving the Disciplined Agile goals and improving their technical practices. Health checks use interviews and goal-achievement surveys to gather results. MCAP shares summarized feedback with each team and this becomes input to each team’s continuous improvement process.

“Using the agile approach has made a huge difference to our productivity. We can narrow focus to the few, most-important stories. Prior to leveraging the agile approach, it was extremely difficult to know what the team should be working on next. The team now feels a sense of control and draws energy from successfully knocking backlog items off the list, prioritized by the business, two weeks at a time.”

—Barbara McDonald, MCAP Senior Director, IT

Implement Continuous Improvement Actions

Teams intentionally include and plan small process improvement tasks in each successive iteration, until members realize that something new is a greater impediment to their progress. That then becomes their focus.

About Scott Ambler + Associates

Scott Ambler + Associates helps organizations apply agile and lean processes within the specific context of their business. Our coaches are certified in many agile and lean frameworks, but our preferred approach is the Disciplined Agile framework. We provide clients a customized and unparalleled experience in delivering agile adoption, transformation, coaching services, staff augmentation and training. Our experts deliver solutions for each client’s needs and pain points.