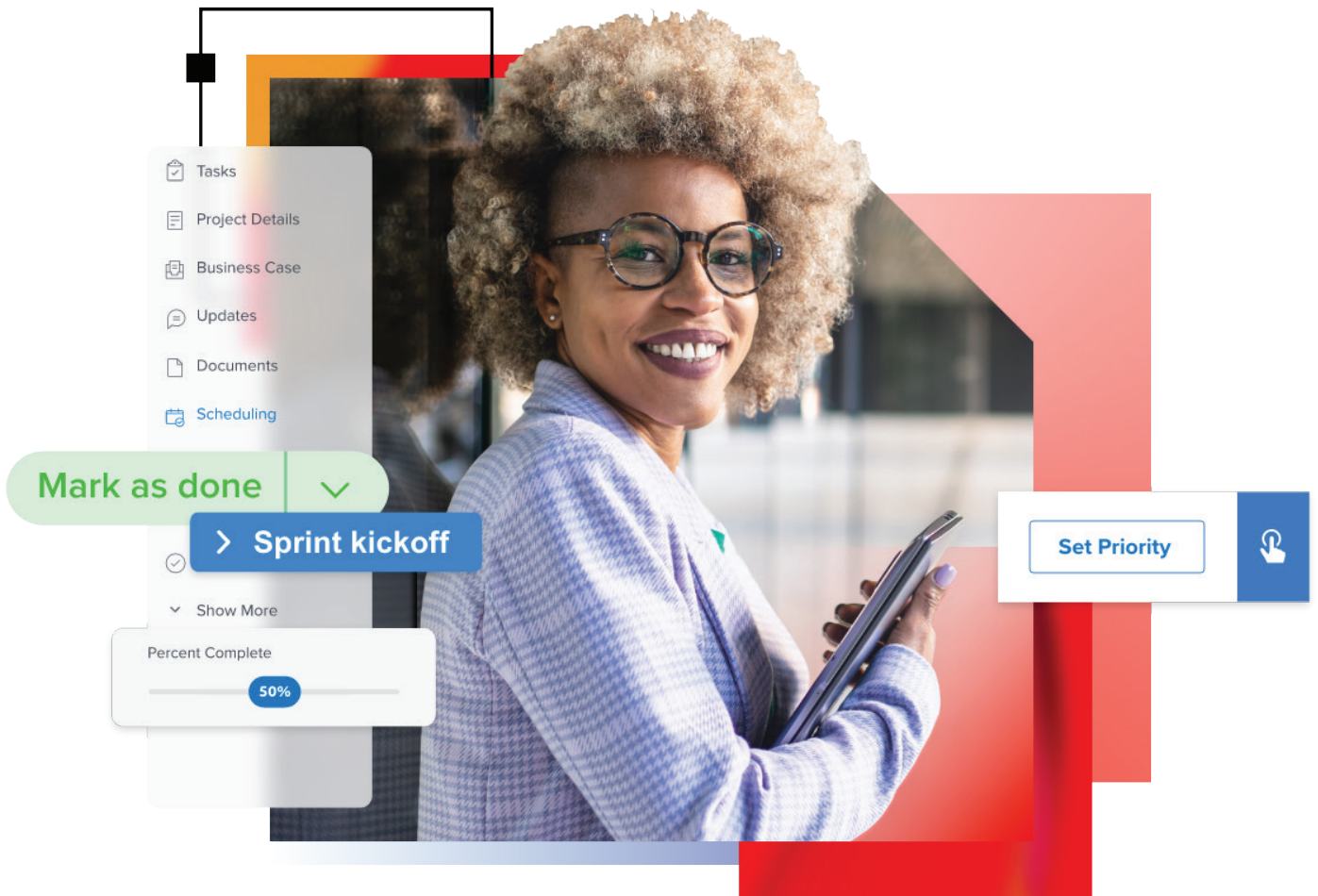# The complete guide to Agile for creative teams.

How to manage creative projects using Agile work management.

Tame your chaos.
Adopt Agile.

Creative teams have massive workloads, constant requests for last-minute projects, unrealistic client demands, persistent fire drills, tedious approval processes, and a marketplace that is always on, always connected, and always changing. And they have to balance all of that while trying to create world-class, compelling work. Because of these challenges, creative work environments have an unprecedented need for speed and flexibility.

Yet most teams still work the same way they did a decade or two ago—research, plan, create, distribute, and measure. This may have worked fine in the past, but in today's world this approach doesn't provide the flexibility or speed necessary to adapt to midstream feedback, dynamic markets, or changing strategy. It also does nothing to stem the tide of overwhelming work requests and chaos that creates missed deadlines, burned out employees, and frustrated clients.

But there's a better way to work, one that roughly 80% of companies have adopted to increase their productivity. Think what you could accomplish with streamlined processes and a more productive team. No more missed deadlines, no more working late hours or weekends, and no more frustrated clients.

So how can you achieve all this? It's simple—Agile.

In this guide, learn everything you need to know about adopting an Agile approach to:

- Organize and manage your workload and team

- Increase your output

- Align your team's priorities

- Keep your clients happy

What is Agile and how does it help creative teams?

Agile is a methodology for managing projects that focuses on improving the speed, productivity, adaptability, and responsiveness of the creative process, both internally and externally. Agile has its roots in the IT development world and adapts to many of those processes but differs slightly when applied to creative work.

Rather than following the traditional or linear, top-down approach to project management—where every stage of a project is finished before moving on to the next one—Agile is a more modern, flexible, team-based approach. Agile emphasizes rapid delivery of smaller chunks of a project over completing the entire project at once.

For example, the traditional approach to a website redesign project follows this model: map the entire project, write all the content for all pages, finalize the design, and then upload the new design and content. In Agile, the process is split into sprints, or two-week intervals, where certain pieces of the project are completed quickly.

The first sprint may focus on simply getting a new website menu template and content for the home page done. Then, the two completed pieces are uploaded immediately. While working on the next sprint, the team gathers feedback from

the customer. If feedback reveals that the web menu on the home page is not intuitive, the team can make immediate adjustments.
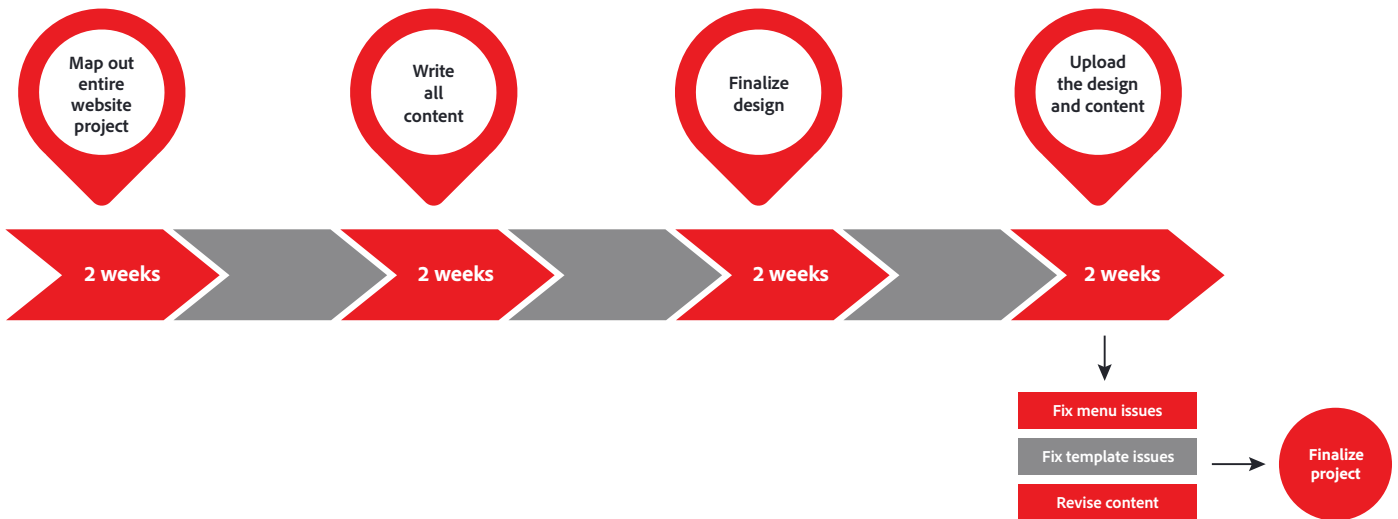
This ability—to change course midstream rather than wait until all the pieces are finalized—allows Agile creative projects to be more productive, more collaborative, and quicker to go to market. It's not about working faster. It's about working better. And that's why it's gaining so much traction in the creative world.

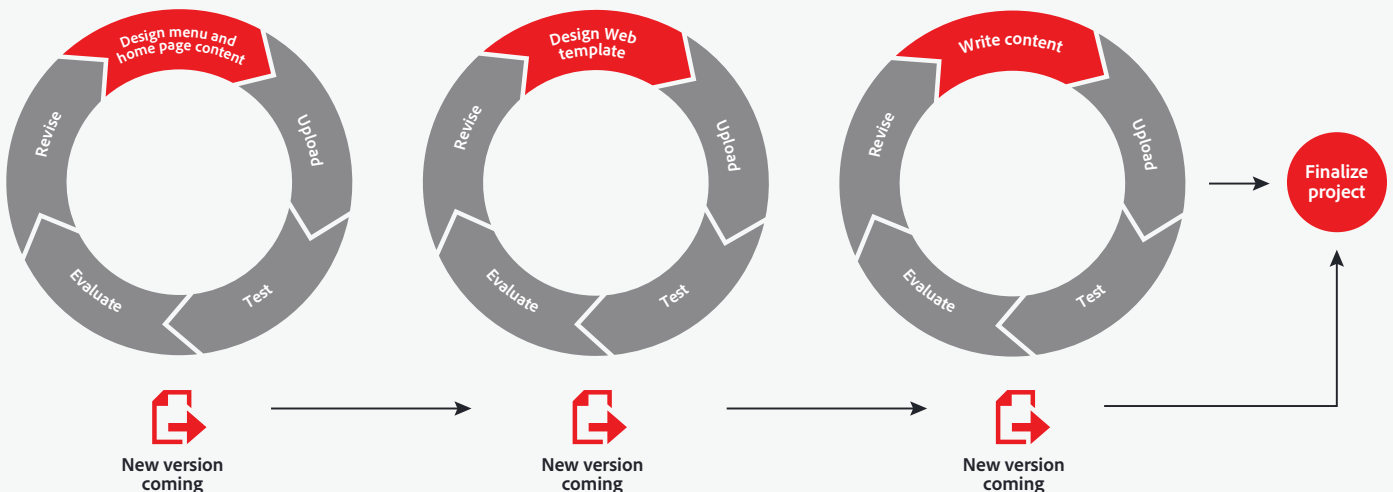**" It's not about working faster. It's about working better.**

Traditional project management

The traditional approach to a website redesign project follows a very linear, step by step process.

Map out entire website project	Write all content	Finalize design	Upload the design and content
2 weeks	2 weeks	2 weeks	2 weeks

Fix menu issues
Fix template issues
Revise content

Finalize project

Agile

With Agile methodology, a website redesign project is broken down into smaller pieces—called sprints—where certain pieces of the project are completed quickly and in phases.

Design menu and home page content
Revise
Upload
Evaluate
Test

Design Web template
Revise
Upload
Evaluate
Test

Write content
Revise
Upload
Evaluate
Test

Finalize project

New version coming

New version coming

New version coming

Common questions about Agile.

As with any big change, it's important to address the common initial objections that creative teams have to implementing an Agile approach to their work. So let's address the most common ones right up front:

"What if the way we've always done it is working fine?"

Change is hard. Staying with the status quo is easy. At least that's how it can seem when faced with a big transition. Creative teams today have seen their workloads increase to the point that it is no longer sustainable to keep things as they've always been. Fortunately, Agile can empower your team to simplify your processes to promote more efficient and collaborative work and give you back time to focus on being creative.

"Will Agile keep my team from being creative?"

You may be afraid that Agile is too structured and will limit your team's creativity. After all, you're "creative types," and processes can feel too restrictive for creatives to flourish. But you would be wrong. The truth is the more time your team has to be creative, the more they can create. Agile is really all about creating the right framework and reducing unnecessary structure—think too many long meetings—so that teams can be flexible and adaptable.

"What if Agile is too complicated for my team?"

And, of course, there's always the argument that it's too complicated to try to transition to a new way of managing work. Most creative teams tend to follow the Scrum framework—another Agile practice—and modify it to meet their needs. Scrum is focused on delivering high-quality outcomes with fewer rigid deadlines, faster iterations, continuous improvements, and more. This practice lets small teams work towards a common goal all while remaining adaptive to rapid changes—which is especially beneficial to creative teams.

Five reasons your creative team needs Agile.

Agile methods produce better results over traditional management for several important business needs—from faster time-to-market to delivering more customer-centric outcomes.

1. **Improve speed to market.**
   Time is money. A slow speed to market gives the competition the upper hand and leaves your brand stale. Agile helps keep your creative workflow moving along smoothly to keep up with increasing demand.

2. **Adapt and respond faster.**
   The ability to adapt and respond faster to change is an important competitive advantage for creative teams. Agile leads the way in helping creative teams adapt to feedback and market changes. To remain part of the conversation, you need to build a highly collaborative, adaptive, and experimental environment that can respond to the demands and expectations of today's customers.

3. **Increase productivity.**
   With Agile, productivity increases because the work is broken down into smaller, easier to tackle pieces. It's like putting together a 5,000-piece puzzle—the puzzle (or project) as a whole is so big and difficult to manage that taking on one small corner or chunk of the puzzle at a time will prove more productive in the long run.

4. **Stay prioritized.**
   Staying focused on the highest priority work allows companies to stay proactive—rather than reactive—and leads to positive market and customer outcomes. It will also help ensure you're working on the most valuable work, making it easier to connect work to strategy.

5. **Create more personalized customer experiences.**
   Today's customers want their experiences to be personalized and highly relevant to their needs. This puts more pressure on creative teams to create the right content—and more of it than ever. Content is always on call, and great creative work is at the heart of amazing customer experiences. So your team needs more time to focus on putting that content together.

Agile helps meet business needs.

Challenge

It takes too long to get valuable, relevant content in front of customers.

Get to market faster

Benefit

Agile speeds up the entire lifecycle of work and gets it to market faster.

Challenge

Trying to switch gears mid-stream throws too many wrenches in the process.

Adapt and respond faster

Benefit

Agile breaks work into smaller stories with focused teams, making work nimbler and easier to change course mid-stream.

Challenge

Most of a creative's time is spent on non-creative work—in meetings, tracking down approvals, giving status updates, and more.

Be more productive

Benefit

Agile sprints help teams work more quickly and efficiently while focusing on the current project.

Challenge

Time is wasted on repetitive tasks, work that doesn't align with strategy, and ad hoc requests.

Identify and prioritize high-impact activities faster

Benefit

Agile prioritizes the most important work first, so teams stay focused on the highest value tasks.

Challenge

Delivering relevant, personalized content is a top priority but difficult to do consistently.

Deliver customer-centric outcomes

Benefit

Adopting Agile helps teams focus on the right work and move faster to create the right experiences at the right time.

Understanding Agile terminology.

There is a lot of terminology associated with Agile. Before getting started, it's important to make sure everyone is speaking the same language. Browse this glossary to get familiar with Agile terms.

Backlog

An ever-evolving list of work requests that conveys to an Agile team what projects to work on first. Requests are expressed in terms of user stories that are assigned estimates—in points or hours—and prioritized accordingly.

Burndown chart

Burndown charts are used to measure the progress of an Agile project at both the iteration and project levels. Visually, a burndown chart is simply a line chart representing remaining work over time.

Iteration/sprint

A fixed duration of time when the team chooses a certain amount of user stories or points to work on and complete. A sprint or iteration is typically a two- to four-week increment.

Story/task

A user story is a high-level definition of a work request, containing just enough information for the team to produce a reasonable estimate of the effort to accomplish the request.

Storyboard/taskboard

A chart with cards and sticky notes that represents all the work in a given sprint. The notes are moved across the board to show progress.

Story points

An estimation unit that measures the complexity and hours it will take to complete a story.

Scrum

A flexible, holistic strategy where a team works as a unit to reach a common goal as opposed to a traditional, sequential approach.

Scrum master

The scrum master is accountable for removing roadblocks to ensure the team's ability to achieve the sprint goal/deliverables. The scrum master is not the team leader but acts as a buffer between the team and any distracting influences.

Team

The team is responsible for delivering the asset or product. A team is typically made up of five to nine people with cross-functional skills who do the actual work (research, write, design, test, execute, and more). It is recommended that the team is self-organizing and self-led, but often teams work with some form of project or team management. Larger creative departments may have multiple teams.

Making the transition to Agile—six easy steps.

Prepare your organization.

We won't lie. Agile is a big transition. Before you dive in, it's important to take some initial steps that increase the likelihood of a smooth and successful transition.

- **Make sure to get leadership buy in.** Without buy in from those at the top, it will be difficult to get the support you and your team must have to make Agile work.

- **Get your team on board.** If your team's not with you, it'll be tough to get things rolling. For resistant team members, work with them to understand their concerns and help them find a role that is appropriate for their skills and personality.

- **Get appropriate training.** Agile can be complex. One of the biggest strategic mistakes is not getting professional training at the start. "Sending people to scrum training, bringing in advisement consultants for the first few projects, and then having a plan for moving it all out systematically—that's where people really find the business value in Agile," says Barbee Davis, author of *Agile Practices for Waterfall Projects*.

- **Develop cross-departmental coordination.** To ensure ongoing collaboration with other non-Agile departments and projects find a way to allow visibility and communication across distributed teams. This may include developing a standard process for submitting work requests and creating real-time visibility on project status for all stakeholders. If you manage your work with a software tool, finding one that can manage both Agile and traditional projects will make this easier.

Create a backlog.

Your backlog is essentially your "to do" list. To make the backlog effective:

- **Develop a single way to add stories to your backlog.** It's important to develop a single way to receive all work requests. Whether they are submitted through a shared spreadsheet, in an email to a specific person, or through work management software, make a rule—if they're not submitted correctly, they don't get added to the backlog. This ensures no requests get lost and all work can be prioritized for upcoming sprints.

- **Briefly describe each task or story.** Descriptions should be short enough to fit on a small note card and added to the backlog as they are received. Larger projects should be divided into a cluster of tasks. Tasks may come in different sizes and complexity.

- **Prioritize your backlog.** Once work requests are posted to your backlog, it's important to prioritize them. This may be based on strategic importance, deadline, who the requester is, or other criteria that makes sense to your team. This is a key step in making sure your team works on what has the most value for your organization.

Assign roles.

Agile revolves around small, hands-on teams that are self-managing, transparent, and highly collaborative. Within the team, there are certain roles. The roles your team needs include:

- **Scrum master.** The scrum master facilitates the process. Not a leader in the traditional sense, the scrum master ensures that the process stays on track and helps remove roadblocks.

- **Project owner.** The project owner defines the goals for the project and acts as the voice of the customer.

- **Creative team.** These are the workhorses of the team. They are tasked with getting the work done. The creative team is composed of different specialties such as writers, designers, digital marketers, and others.

- **Stakeholders.** The stakeholder role is informational only. They are kept up to date on the project but typically are not involved in the process.

Set goals for the sprint.

There are several key considerations in determining what will be accomplished in each sprint. You will need to:

- **Determine the length of the sprint.** Sprints are typically two to four weeks long. Select a length that you feel is doable for your team and allows you to complete a reasonable number of stories.

- **Estimate story points for each story.** Based on previous experience or your best educated guess, assign a number of points to each story. These points will be in relation to the complexity and hours involved in each story or task.

- **Determine "lights on" work hours.** To determine how many hours or points your team can complete per sprint, have each team member calculate how much time they spend a day on "lights on" work like attending meetings, managing emails, etc. Then take the remaining hours each day for each team member, add the hours up, and multiply by the number of workdays in your sprint to determine the total number of hours you can dedicate to a sprint. To keep your goals realistic and achievable, be careful not to over-allocate your team.

Hold daily stand-up meetings.

Daily stand-up meetings are meant to be short—under 10 minutes—and focused. The meetings should be directed by the scrum master and are used to keep everything on track and everyone informed. There are several key tasks that each meeting should accomplish:

- **Assign stories/tasks.** Unlike the traditional method of top-down task assignment, in Agile the team members typically self-commit, based on priority, to the stories or tasks that they will work on during a sprint. When they move one story to "Complete," they select another to begin working on.

- **Discuss the progress of the sprint.** Stand up meetings are a good time to review the team's progress. This is a moment of accountability for all team members. Along with evaluating progress on the burndown chart, each member should report on what they did yesterday, what they will work on today, and what risks there are to completing their tasks on time.

- **Reorder backlog as necessary.** All new work requests get added to the backlog and prioritized according to previously defined rules. Ideally no new work gets added mid-sprint but if necessary it is prioritized against other tasks. Tasks from the sprint may also be pulled and then re-prioritized on the backlog to accommodate any urgent work that is added.

Continually measure and evaluate.

Agile is all about being more transparent and nimble. To enforce this, you must consistently and constantly:

- **Update the storyboard.** If using a storyboard rather than a software tool, move your sticky notes as necessary to show progress—for example, from working on to complete. This keeps the process transparent, and everyone can see at a glance where things stand.

- **Update the burndown chart.** The scrum master is responsible for ensuring that the burndown chart gets updated as stories are completed. This keeps the process highly transparent and makes it easy for all team members—including stakeholders—to quickly see the progress of the sprint.

- **Hold sprint reviews.** At the end of a sprint it is important to review both the process and the deliverables produced. This is usually kept to an hour or so and may involve getting feedback from stakeholders as well. From the information gleaned, adapt as necessary to improve the next sprint.

- **Recognize the team.** A sprint review is also a good time to give the team recognition for their accomplishments.

- **Begin planning the next sprint.** The cycle begins again.

How to determine your team's available hours for a sprint.

STEP 1

Have each team member determine their total number of "lights on" hours for the week

Number of "lights on" hours per day						
"Lights on" activities	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	
Meeting hours	1	2	2	1	1	
Meeting hours						
Vacation hours						
Holiday hours						
Email hours	2	2	2	2	2	
Other						Total "lights on" hours for the week:
Total hours:	3	4	4	3	3	17

STEP 2

Find the total available hours, per person, for the week

Total hours/week	40
- Total "lights on" hours/week	– 17
= Total available hours	23

STEP 3

Find the percent of availablity, per person, for the week

Total available hours	23
X 100	x 100
Available hours total (A)	= 2,300
/ Total hours per week	/ 40
= Percent of availability	= 57.5%

STEP 4

Repeat process for each week in the spirit

STEP 5

Gather numbers from entire team for the week

Team member	Availability	Days off	Available hours
Johnny	57.50%	0	23
Freddy	60%	0	24
Ashley	55%	0	22
Shaina	65%	0	26
Juan	60%	0	24
		Total available team hours for the week:	119

STEP 6

If your sprint is multiple weeks, do steps 1–5 for each week of the sprint and add totals accordingly.

Implementing Agile the right way.

Now that you know more about Agile it's time to take the plunge. But don't dive in all at once. It is a big change so start with one team and take it slowly. And just like the Agile methodology, test early and test often. See what is working well and what is not. You may find certain team members are better suited for different roles than expected or you may find that longer or shorter sprints make more sense for your team and work processes. Adjust your process as necessary to keeping your team running smoothly.

To make the transition simpler, continue to translate key metrics, such as the scope, budget, and schedule within a traditional framework that external stakeholders and non-Agile teams can understand. Consider using a work management application to help. The right application can save time and work better than a whiteboard and sticky notes. And an application that allows you to track all your work in both Agile and traditional project management—and toggle between the two seamlessly—will make implementing Agile even easier. This lets your team and non-Agile teams to see all the work in the way that makes the most sense without you needing to translate. Additionally, look for a work management tool with built-in collaboration features to keep all work communication in one place—in the context of the work.

A better work management tool.

Adobe Workfront is enterprise work management application that connects work to strategy and drives better collaboration to deliver measurable business outcomes. It integrates people, data, processes, and technology across an organization, so you can manage the entire lifecycle of projects from start to finish. By optimizing and centralizing digital projects, cross-functional teams can connect, collaborate, and execute from anywhere to help them do their best work.

Benefits of Workfront for creative teams:

- Create a backlog with centralized intake

- Prioritize requests that align with strategy

- Cascade goals through projects and tasks

- See user stories, sprint progress, and burndown charts on an intuitive dashboard

- Monitor and respond to changes happening with easy drag-and-drop tools

While change is always difficult, it is often necessary. And the overwhelming success of creative teams that have implemented Agile methods within their work management processes makes it clear that it's a change worth making. Stop living with the chaos and start managing a more collaborative, adaptable, modern, and successful creative team.

Discover the possibilities with [Adobe Workfront](#).

Sources

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Rich Morrow, "How to Unlock the Promise of Agile in the Enterprise," Workfront and GigaOm Research, December 18, 2013.