



SingleMind Consulting
Portland, Ore.
www.singlemindconsulting.com

Founded: 2004

Employees: 8

Annual revenue: Private

Products: technology consulting, including system integrations, application development, and database design

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-- Cort Buchholz, President, SingleMind Consulting

Situation

Since founding SingleMind Consulting in 2004, Cort Buchholz — the company’s president, a software developer, and a certified ScrumMaster — has delivered technology consultation and software development services to a wide range of clients. Such a diverse customer base means Buchholz and his team have to think critically and creatively to meet the individual needs of each client. But when clients lack a clear sense of what they need or how to list and accomplish requirements, that’s another kind of challenge altogether.

In August 2006, SingleMind was hired by a large publisher of higher education textbooks that wanted to begin using Java technologies in its educational software applications, yet had virtually no concrete requirements after a year of work. SingleMind had used Agile practices on previous projects, and Buchholz recognized that the client’s inability to articulate specific technical needs would require a highly structured methodology. This is a common scenario in software development, known as “IKIWISI” or “I’ll know it when I see it.” According to “IKIWISI,” a client can provide the best direction when reacting to a demonstrable feature of the product. In this case, Buchholz decided Scrum’s iterative processes would not only provide the client with a process for an ongoing conversation about emerging requirements and priorities, but also shield his team from unrealistic expectations.

“The client had an understanding of its business needs but no requirements for accomplishing them, which was a flag that Agile methods needed to be used,” said Buchholz. “Scrum helped refine requirements and, just as importantly, gave us a framework for conversation between the client and our developers.”

After some initial discussions with Danube, Buchholz encouraged his client to attend a Certified ScrumMaster training session with SingleMind’s developers so that everyone could share a common understanding of the principles under which they would be operating.

Application

To kick off the project, members of SingleMind and the primary client contact attended a public ScrumMaster Certification course conducted by Danube. The client contact loved the training. According to Buchholz, the course not only educated everyone on Scrum’s principles and processes, but also served as a teambuilding exercise. From that point, the client contact began to serve as the project’s Product Owner. One of the Product Owner’s most valuable contributions to the project was



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serving as an organizational change agent and facilitating acceptance of the Scrum framework throughout the client company. Buchholz believes that the success of this project — in tandem with the Product Owner’s internal advocacy of Scrum — was largely responsible for convincing management of the client company to move from a dogmatically waterfall organization to considering Scrum as a more effective approach to their development practices.

From the client’s perspective, Scrum was appealing because it used the empirically based metric of velocity to inform estimates and release planning, rather than the guesswork so often employed in traditional project planning. Having spent many years managing development teams, the client contact viewed Scrum as a way to boost both a development team’s productivity and the quality of its delivery. SingleMind, on the other hand, appreciated that Scrum streamlined the delivery process and put responsibility for prioritization of business requirements in the client’s court while leaving only the technical execution to the company’s developers. Furthermore the Scrum process ensured that, as often is not the case with waterfall process projects, it was the client that designed the product and not the development team.

“With Scrum, we were only responsible for delivering quality work for each sprint,” Buchholz explained.

The training invigorated everyone involved in the project and helped the client move beyond analysis paralysis. When SingleMind produced a deliverable within the first sprint, the client was speechless.

Solution

By the project’s end, SingleMind had finished on-time and within budget. The client deemed the work a wild success: Scrum has spread organically throughout the client organization and SingleMind has received additional project work.

According to Buchholz, he and his team are no longer entertaining waterfall projects. Instead, almost every project now involves the core elements of the Scrum methodology.

“Scrum builds a lot of safety for the development team,” he said. “Working within the confines of a two-week Sprint, conversations are framed around what can be accomplished immediately, rather than promised distant goals.”

The logo for Danube Technologies, featuring the word "danube" in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font on a blue rectangular background.

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