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One way to prevent disorganized agile sprints is to maintain a healthy product backlog. It helps you keep track of all items that need to be completed during a project, including stories, tasks, sub-tasks, and any other details that help identify and complete features, improvements, or bug fixes. Items are entered into the backlog in the form of issues or tickets, depending on which agile project management system you use. In this article, we'll discuss what a healthy backlog looks like, why backlog grooming is essential, and how to do it effectively. Defining a Healthy Product Backlog Every project is different, but a healthy backlog has the following characteristics: Consists of tickets that represent all the work that needs to be completed during a project, no matter how detailed the information. Has tickets created by multiple users, showing the team is forward-thinking and everyone is contributing. Shows progression week after week, as more research is done and tickets become more defined. The backlog helps you maintain focus on the core work while also providing a space to track new ideas that surface. Clients and team members can add ideas to the backlog (and should be encouraged to do so) whenever they arise without having to go through a formal process. A healthy backlog has new ideas coming in regularly from all levels of the organization. Grooming to Deliver Value Backlog grooming progressively defines and prioritizes all tickets found in the backlog, so your team is well-prepared to begin development. Grooming happens at defined intervals with meetings that last a minimum of 1 hour, typically only once per sprint. Grooming meetings should involve the whole team, but at the very least, product owners, team leads, and senior position members need to participate. As grooming progresses, a very rough list of work turns into precise and defined granular tasks. Imagine starting with the ticket "bake a cake" in the backlog. After a few grooming sessions, that ticket turns into "get the recipe, go to the grocery store, buy eggs, milk and butter, pre-heat oven to 400 degrees", and so on. During grooming meetings, your team looks at top items in the backlog to make sure each is sufficiently understood, and small enough to bring into a sprint. This way, developers can immediately start working on the highest priority tickets with minimal questions or unknowns. Running Efficient Grooming Meetings You are looking to accomplish a few things through grooming sessions. First and foremost, you want to make sure tickets at the top of the backlog are fully fleshed out and ready to be put into the next sprint. Have the team think through unknowns and any technical questions and assign needed research to appropriate team members. Week by week, tickets will become more defined which may lead to additional supporting work. You also want to prioritize the most important items so the highest priority items get the most attention. Overall, grooming meetings allow your team to take a step back and have the necessary, structured conversations around the status of items in the backlog. Make sure you discuss: The importance of tickets and its priority compared to others Validity of tickets The best way to implement the technical aspect of a ticket that needs to be solved before a ticket can be started Supporting tickets that need to be created or existing tickets blocking progress When you're done with grooming, you should have a set of well-documented tickets with a defined goal, acceptance criteria, and technical implementation notes, if the complexity merits it. You've thought through all different user types, how changes would affect them, and ensured there are acceptance criteria to cover those requirements. Successful backlog grooming ensures your team is well-prepared for upcoming Agile ceremonies and set up for success with your next sprint. If you're struggling with disorganized sprints, getting things done on time, or finding value in your agile ceremonies, contact DragonSpears. We have Agile consultants ready to help get your team on the right track. A Minimum Marketable Feature is a small, self-contained feature that can be developed quickly and that delivers significant value to the user. Exploratory testing is, more than strictly speaking a "practice," a style or approach to testing software which is often contrasted to "scripted testing." Continuous deployment aims to reduce the time elapsed between writing a line of code and making that code available to users in production. To achieve continuous deployment, the team relies on infrastructure that automates and instruments the various steps leading up to deployment, so that after each integration successfully meeting these release criteria, the live application is updated with new code. A Milestone Retrospective is a team's detailed analysis of the project's significant events after a set period of time or at the project's end. • 4 min. reading time In order for a sprint to be planned and work to begin in Scrum, the product backlog must be well maintained and filled with appropriately prepared product backlog items. It is logical that the backlog must be refined on a regular basis - but how does that actually work? In this article, we'll show you exactly what you need to do to refine your backlog, and why it's so important. What is the Product Backlog Grooming or Refinement in Scrum? Until a while ago, product backlog refinement in Scrum was called backlog grooming. Backlog refinement is about maintaining and preparing the product backlog with its items and epics so that the Scrum team can use it as a basis for sprint planning. Product Backlog Refinement therefore means: The Product Backlog items are elaborated, evaluated and prioritized in such a way that the Development Team can complete a Sprint Backlog from them. A maintained product backlog should always contain at least as many prepared product backlog items in stock that can be used to plan a complete sprint. The overall goal of backlog grooming is to ensure that the development team understands the product vision of the product owner and the user stories he or she has created, and is thus able to plan the next sprint according to the sprint goals. By the way, if you look up the term Refinement in the Scrum Guide, you will find that it is not one of the official Scrum events or occurrences such as Sprint and Daily Scrum. Rather, the Product Backlog Refinement is a so-called activity that takes place as a meeting. In addition to the product owner and the development team, the Scrum master and - especially in the case of strategic refinements - stakeholders take part in the refinement meeting. What is the Product Backlog? This is how the Backlog Refinement Meeting works Before the actual backlog refinement, there is the preparation: The Product Owner sets the goal of the Sprint (Outcome). According to this sprint goal, the PO prioritizes the product backlog and selects the most important product backlog items (PBIs) or writes new ones. The Scrum Team jointly formulates a Definition of Ready (DoR), which defines which characteristics or which level of detail these Product Backlog Items must have so that the development team can include them in a Sprint. Now it's time to conduct the Backlog Refinement Meeting: The product owner and the development team discuss the sprint goals and the associated PBIs. It is important that the PO only communicates the goal to be achieved and does not specify how it should be achieved. The development team provides input. This includes their own ideas for implementation, based on their knowledge of the product, on the one hand, and comments on technical dependencies and the highest priority items from the product backlog, on the other. Before a story is ready for sprint planning, it needs to be "groomed." With the product owner, the development team decides the Backlog Item, the PO or a team member documents this PBI according to the DoR formulated in point 3 and notes acceptance criteria, for example. Many teams also perform effort estimation at this point - they then call it Estimation Poker rather than Planning Poker, since it does not take place in Why is the Product Backlog Refinement (Grooming) necessary for success? A good product owner takes refinement very seriously. He knows that regular and serious backlog grooming lays the foundation for the course of the subsequent sprint and thus for the success of a product, because: Refinement ensures that the Product Backlog is up to date and can be used as a basis for the next Sprint Planning. This type of preliminary work allows the development team to deal with the most important PBIs at an early stage and to ask questions that would otherwise only arise during Sprint Planning. This gives the PO the opportunity to find the answers in time for the Planning Meeting. The Sprint Planning meetings become shorter, because now only the "how" of the implementation has to be discussed, since the "what" has been clarified by the refinement. In addition, the PBIs have ideally already been estimated by the team and can be drawn according to velocity. This avoids that not enough prepared PBIs are available in Sprint Planning. By dealing with the PBIs together, the PO and the development team develop a common understanding of the vision, goals and tasks more quickly. All ideas of the development team for the implementation of a PBI are noted in it in the Refinement. There is a tremendous transfer of knowledge as the PO gives the team more and more context about customers, business model, etc. through the Refinement. In the sprint, the team can focus more on the actual work, because the most important questions were clarified in the refinement. Product Backlog Characteristics This is what you should keep in mind during Product Backlog Refinement! Before you can finally prioritize or order the PBIs in the Product Backlog, you should have a feeling for the requirements, testable units of work, and correct story sizes. As a leading software development company, Zibtek understands the value backlog grooming brings to sprint planning. For us, backlog grooming is not a one-off activity but one that's regularly revisited and scheduled as an ongoing part of the Scrum development process. Our software project process is designed to make sprint meetings more productive through the use of aggressive backlog grooming. If you'd like to know more about how our process helps you get the most out of your software, we invite you to check out our Software Development Comparison Guide or reach out to us today with any questions you might have. Agile helps development teams build better products by breaking down the development process into small, manageable chunks. But with so many different things to do, it's easy to lose track of what teams should be doing and when. Two Agile practices often confused with each other are backlog grooming and sprint planning. So today, we're going to look at both activities to see how they are different and how each helps agile teams perform better during sprints. Table of contents What is backlog grooming? What is a backlog? A backlog is a list of tasks required to support a larger strategic plan. In Agile, there are three forms of backlogs: Product backlog - Features you want to implement but have not yet prioritized for release. Release backlog - Features that need to be implemented for a particular release. Sprint backlog - User stories that need to be completed during a specific period of time. A backlog needs to serve as a single source of truth for the team's planning work. They should be able to easily identify what they need to work on next and how they should prioritize their work. This makes it easier to assign work and create discussions around what needs to be done. What happens during backlog grooming? Backlog grooming sessions are essential to ensure projects run smoothly. During the grooming session, the team will get together to ensure user stories in the product backlog are prepared for sprint planning. Backlog grooming sessions should be held regularly so the right stories are correctly prioritized, and the product backlog doesn't become a place ideas go to die. During backlog grooming, there are three key objectives: Break down large user stories into smaller, more manageable tasks Hold group discussions for user stories, and answer any questions to ensure everyone is in alignment Check upcoming user stories against the team's "definition of ready" by adding key contextual information and acceptance criteria. By the end of the backlog grooming session, the team should have a prioritized list of user stories ready for the next sprint. Why is this an important step in the sprint process? Backlog grooming ensures that the product backlog is refined and prioritized, which is why it's so important to perform regularly. The session helps teams stay aligned and updated on everything they need to know to do their jobs well. It ensures that the product backlog is always relevant and healthy by refining it to match customer expectations, even with changing requirements. A well-refined backlog will help teams increase efficiency because they can easily identify what needs to happen and when. What is sprint planning? Sprint planning is an agile event that gets a sprint underway. It defines what can be achieved during the sprint and how the team will work together to produce any defined deliverables. What happens during sprint planning? The sprint planning meeting is just what the name suggests. Teams get together to plan the upcoming sprint by defining how long the timebox will be, the sprint goal, and where to start. By clearly laying out the sprint's agenda and focus, teams can empower themselves and achieve success by keeping them motivated throughout the sprint. There are five key things involved in a sprint planning meeting: The What: The product owner will describe the sprint goal and define which backlog items contribute to that goal. The team will then discuss what can be achieved during the sprint and what actions they will perform to achieve them. The Who: The development team will plan the work required to achieve the sprint goal. The Who: The entire development team and the product owner need to attend the sprint planning meeting. The Inputs: The team needs to identify what items from the product backlog will be involved in the sprint. The Outputs: The team should come out of the planning meeting with a clear picture of the goal of the sprint and how it will start working toward that goal. Why is sprint planning important? Sprint planning sets the scene for the upcoming sprint entirely transparently. It ensures that the entire team is aligned with the sprint goals, and everyone knows what they need to do to achieve those goals. By breaking up the project into more manageable pieces, teams spend less time figuring out what they need to do and more time achieving targets. This helps boost morale because the satisfaction that comes with completing a job is more frequent and rewarding. Backlog grooming vs. sprint planning, what is the difference? Backlog grooming and sprint planning are often confused with each other, especially with teams that are new to agile. Both activities ensure that teams have a shared understanding of the tasks they need to perform. Both require everyone to participate, and both can achieve better outcomes if someone in the meeting acts as the "Voice of the Customer." Yet, despite their similarities, backlog grooming and sprint planning have distinct purposes. Sprint planning focuses on the near future, only discussing what will happen within the next sprint. Backlog grooming sessions look at the entire project to help prioritize. Backlog grooming needs to happen before sprint planning so teams can be certain they're planning sprints around the most critical items in the backlog. Sprint planning meetings must be attended by the entire team, including product owners, whereas backlog grooming needs just a few team members. Sprint planning always happens at the beginning of a sprint, but backlog grooming sessions can happen at any stage in the product development process. For teams to receive all the benefits of agile, they should groom their backlogs at a regular pace and hold sprint planning meetings, rather than trying to combine the two activities into one meeting. To learn more about Agile, Scrum, and anything else you need to know about product management, EasyRetro is here to help. Check out our blog to learn more about sprint methodology, sprint velocity, sprint burndown charts, and much more! And try EasyRetro to revolutionize your team's collaboration process. Get started for FREE today! Backlog grooming, also referred to as backlog refinement or story time, is a recurring event for agile product development teams. The primary purpose of a backlog grooming session is to ensure the project's worth of user stories in the product backlog are prepared for sprint planning. Regular backlog grooming sessions also help ensure the right stories are prioritized and that the product backlog does not become a black hole for ideas that need to be implemented. While backlog grooming sessions are essential to ensure projects run smoothly, during the grooming session, the team should have a prioritized list of user stories ready for the next sprint. Why is this an important step in the sprint process? Backlog grooming ensures that the product backlog is refined and prioritized, which is why it's so important to perform regularly. The session helps teams stay aligned and updated on everything they need to know to do their jobs well. 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