

FORUM ON TAX ADMINISTRATION

New ways of Working Series

Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore

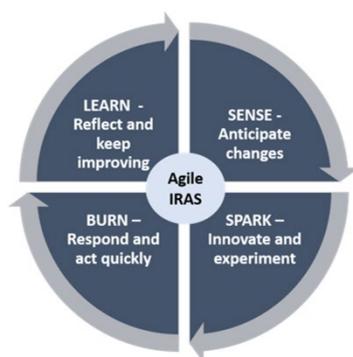
Working AGILE in IRAS

INTRODUCTION

In this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world, organisational agility is key to staying fleet-footed and adapting to the changing environment. COVID-19 has proven that agility is no longer just a “good-to-have” but has become a necessity.

The Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (IRAS) is continuously striving to transform taxpayers’ experiences by enlarging its workforce capacity to deliver higher levels of innovation with agility. The world today is increasingly digital with most transactions taking place in the online space. IRAS ensures that its people are capable to handle digital challenges through ingraining an Agile culture.

Figure 1: Vision for an Agile IRAS



Our vision of a **desired Agile IRAS...**

- Anticipates and stays alert to changes in the environment;
- Innovates and experiments to try new ideas;
- Responds swiftly, acts urgently and adjusts continually;
- Reflects and keeps improving to stay ahead.

OVERARCHING FRAMEWORK AND PRINCIPLES

IRAS has made IT development Agile by default since 2017. To reap the full benefits and wide opportunities that Agile offers, IRAS has promoted and integrated Agile as part of its working culture across the whole organisation, beyond IT. In 2020, IRAS developed a framework to enable its people (from leaders to officers) to Be Agile by default, which means to:

Figure 2: Be Agile



Source: Singapore – Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (2021)

IRAS developed a set of AGILE principles to be adopted at different levels across the organisation to achieve a shared purpose and vision of an Agile IRAS. These are cascaded across the organisation and reinforced with continuous communications and engagement.

All IRAS officers are encouraged to adopt an Agile mindset and apply these **AGILE** principles¹ as part of their day-to-day work:

- **Autonomous and self-organising:** e.g. i) make decisions independently within their sphere of influence, instead of waiting for instructions, and take responsibility and accountability for the decisions made; and ii) take the initiative in delivering work outcomes and contributing to the organisation's success.
- **Grow:** e.g. i) adopt a growth mindset, embracing continuous learning and seeking out new opportunities and experiences to improve; and ii) take feedback constructively and not personally, and actively improve on areas of weaknesses.
- **Ignite ideas and innovate to respond quickly:** e.g. i) actively seek out simple solutions on an ongoing basis to improve everyday work processes; and ii) follow-through on feedback received to implement changes quickly.
- **Link up and collaborate (externally & internally):** e.g. i) adopt empathetic listening to better understand stakeholders' needs, and tap on interactions with stakeholders to collaborate and get feedback on potential solutions; ii) be prepared to tap on the expertise of others and, at the same time, help others achieve common goals, instead of focusing only on one's own areas of work; and iii) be held accountable to collaborate.
- **Embrace risks and learn from failures:** e.g. i) be willing to speak up/ ask questions and fight fear of what others think; and ii) take risks and make decisions on the ground based on reasonable thresholds.

HOW WORKING AGILE HAS SERVED IRAS WELL

Working AGILE creates plenty of opportunities and benefits for the organisation:

¹ IRAS' AGILE principles were adapted from the 12 principles of Agile Software Development from the Agile Manifesto and applied to IRAS' context. These principles can be found at agilemanifesto.org.

- **Boost innovation and putting taxpayers at the centre:** Redefining experiences for taxpayers has always been one of IRAS' transformation objectives. To deliver seamless customer centric experiences over multi-channels in an agile manner, IRAS pivoted from a traditional service centre which focuses on transactional, touch-and-go contacts (e.g. fast response time to meet service levels) to a next-generation innovative opportunity centre. Officers no longer focus solely on delivering their individual tasks, but are empowered with new skills and AI, as well as digital and data tools, to collaborate with different stakeholders to improve taxpayer experiences. This paradigm shift from helping taxpayers with their tax transactions to focusing on serving taxpayers by enhancing taxpayer experiences, supported by digital tools, underpins our drive towards service excellence.

Redesigning IRAS website

The objective was to redesign the website and improve taxpayer's digital experience, ensuring that they can find information and services easily and seamlessly without the need for assistance. The team executed the Agile principles throughout the project, adhering closely to the overall framework as described above.

IRAS adopted a data-driven and people-centred approach by first looking into past data sets (e.g. Biennial Taxpayer Surveys, Online feedback, etc.) to determine taxpayer sentiments regarding the current website. Design sprints (i.e. time-boxed process for solving problems through designing, prototyping and testing ideas with users) were also autonomously conducted by the team to gather insights from frontline and backroom colleagues on features that should be included in the new website to address identified pain points and leverage opportunity areas.

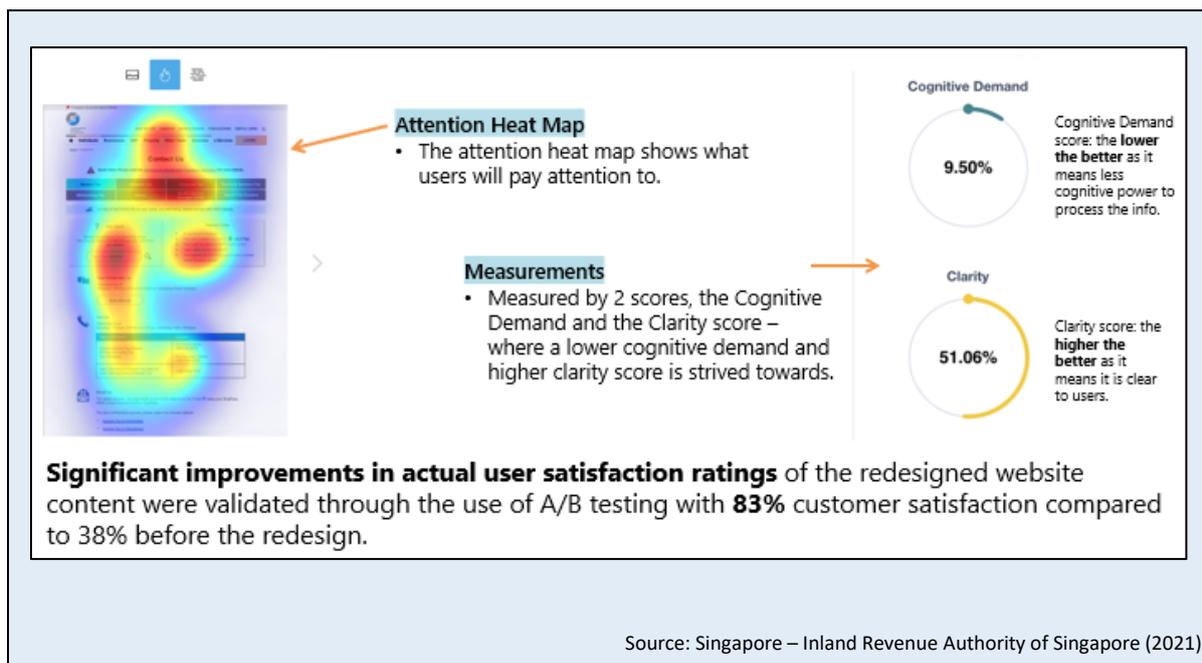
Through the design sprints, the team produced different prototypes which were then tested on the current website with taxpayers. Using A/B testing capabilities, IRAS tested two or more versions of a same page with taxpayers, and ran statistical analysis to determine which version performed better. For instance, the Corporate Tax webpage on the New Company Start-Up Kit was re-designed incorporating behavioural science elements and compared against the original version. The quantitative data gathered through the tracking of click-through rate, exit rate and average time spent on page allowed IRAS to learn that the re-designed version provided greater clarity (41.3% improvement) and resulted in better user engagement.

As part of the experimentation and innovation process, the team tapped on different digital and data tools that would support the website design.

With the use of the attention AI prediction tool that automatically analyses and predicts what people are most likely to see and miss, the effectiveness of the redesigned webpages has shown an improvement. Key content within IRAS webpages were re-organised, with the tool calculating lowered cognitive demand scores (from 20.5% to 9.5% - more intuitive), and increased clarity scores (from 23.3% to 51.1% - more clarity). IRAS found this digital tool very effective, and this is further reinforced by the positive feedback received through the use of A/B testing with 83% customer satisfaction compared to 38% before the redesign.

IRAS also pursued the unconventional idea of allowing taxpayers to propose edits for the website as this offered opportunities for citizen co-creation. Feedback from a group of taxpayers enabled the team to conclude that the proposed information architecture on the Deductions for Individuals (Reliefs and Rebates) webpage was misleading. The team then quickly improved the clarity of the links between webpages and how the information was organised on the website.

The redesigned IRAS website was successfully launched on 23 Oct 2021. In the first month, the redesigned website achieved an improvement in customer satisfaction score of 8%-points as compared to one month prior. In the spirit of agility, IRAS will continue to monitor customer sentiments and feedback, and iteratively test and implement website changes for improved taxpayer experiences.



- **Respond quickly to unexpected changes:** Being Agile means that IRAS can respond nimbly to unexpected situations and fluid changes. During such times, prompt and clear communication among the management team is important when deciding the best course of action to take. The management must also think and act Agile, and be willing to manage trade-offs and put the organisation’s priorities above the Divisional interests.

For instance, in order to respond to the surge in Covid-19 pandemic related work, various Division Heads reviewed their internal resourcing needs and made adjustments to re-allocate work and redeploy officers who could be released for the required period. The nimble re-deployment of officers would not have been possible without the strong management support and recognition that meeting the unexpected surge in manpower demand was a Whole-of-IRAS priority. The pilot showed that it is possible to train a pool of officers ‘just-in-time’ to be deployed to areas of urgent needs, if the officers are adaptable and open to learning new skills. As IRAS seeks to build organisational agility and an agile workforce, we recognise the importance of flexible deployment of officers to augment manpower demands in areas of urgent needs, while at the same time, build career fitness of our people by providing them with new skills and immersive experiences in other Divisions’ work.

Redeployment of officers to support Covid-19 related measures

To help businesses weather the COVID-19 crisis, Singapore introduced a number of disbursement schemes and programmes to provide timely assistance. Tasked with the role of enterprise disbursement, IRAS had to be agile and nimble so as to provide timely assistance to enterprises. The unexpected surge in manpower was largely met through nimble re-deployment of our officers from different functions across IRAS, and through inter-agency deployment.

Singapore Customs officers were re-deployed from the airport to assist in handling frontline enquiries on the disbursement schemes, exhibiting a strong teamwork across the Government. At the same time, the Enterprise Grants Management (EGM) branch was formed in January 2021 to further build dedicated expertise in the administration of various Government disbursement schemes.

The COVID-19 disbursement measures had to be administered swiftly so that support could reach businesses as soon as possible. The 2020 Rental Relief Framework (RRF) was one such example. Within 2 weeks, the Property Tax Division (PTD) reviewed its annual work plan and made substantial changes, in order to deploy

about 60 officers or 40% of its manpower to support the different functions of the RRF – data and system, frontline service and assessment.

Besides internal re-deployment within PTD, 17 officers from other Divisions in IRAS also stepped up to volunteer to help with the RRF. Although they did not have prior experience or subject matter knowledge, they learned quickly and succeed in their new roles.



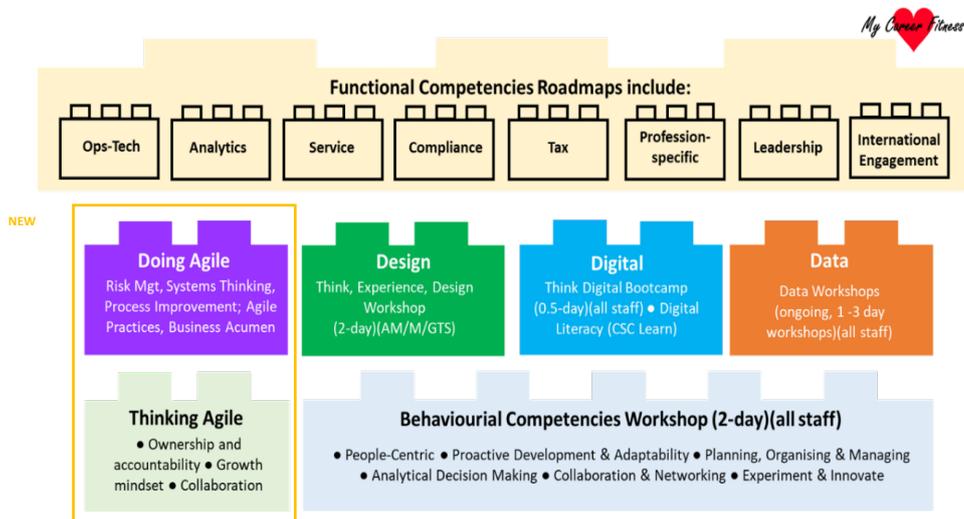
Source: Singapore – Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (2021)

EFFECTIVE ENTERPRISE-WIDE IMPLEMENTATION

Working AGILE requires an implementation approach to develop and deploy Agile at an enterprise-level. This is done through 2 key strategies:

- **Building Agile as a concrete capability for IRAS:** IRAS has made Design, Digital, and Data the foundational competencies for all officers since 2016. IRAS believes that Behavioural Competencies (BCs) complement functional competencies in upskilling its people holistically. In 2020, IRAS updated its organisational-level Competency Development Plans to include Agile.

Figure. 3. Updated IRAS-level Competency Development Plans



Equipping all IRAS officers to Know Agile

IRAS is equipping its people to learn and understand Agile concepts and practices through the following measures:

- **Agile Playbook:** IRAS developed and launched a how-to guide to induct officers to the concept of Agile and aid them in adopting an Agile mindset and practices. It also ensures that there is a consistent understanding of what Agile means across the organisation. The playbook consists of a step-by-step Agile Starter Kit, basic Agile concepts and practices, and a list of Agile artefacts for officers to utilise.
 - **Agile courses:** IRAS curated a list of courses that focus on Agile fundamentals (e.g. Scrum² and Kanban³) and these are included as our core learning programmes. Officers can acquire Agile knowledge through these workshops or e-learning courses on Singapore's Civil Service College LEARN platform, which is a one-stop online learning platform for Public officers.
 - **Behavioural Competency (BC)+ Programme:** IRAS will be launching the refreshed BC+ programme, on top of the current BC programme that focuses on 6 BCs⁴, to help officers internalise new skills and mindsets on Agile and empower them with relevant skillsets to navigate the future work landscape.
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- **Promoting the use of Agile for diverse tax administration and enterprise disbursement functions:** IRAS encourages all its people to put what they have learnt into practice by participating in Agile, multi-skilled cross-functional teams to experiment and innovate in different work areas and tapping on AI, digital and data tools as complementary levers. Cross-functional teams means that its members may come from diverse backgrounds and different parts of the organisation so that each member could share his/her expertise to achieve desired outcomes within a short, time-boxed period. This new working modality provides for small-group stand-up meetings to exchange ideas and solutions, allowing for more fluid communication to quickly address challenges. Cross-functional teams can spark ideas and innovate in a quicker fashion, allowing evaluation of multiple solutions in a short span of time.

Encouraging participation in Agile cross-functional teams

IRAS has supported and encouraged its people to participate in Agile cross-functional teams through the following measures:

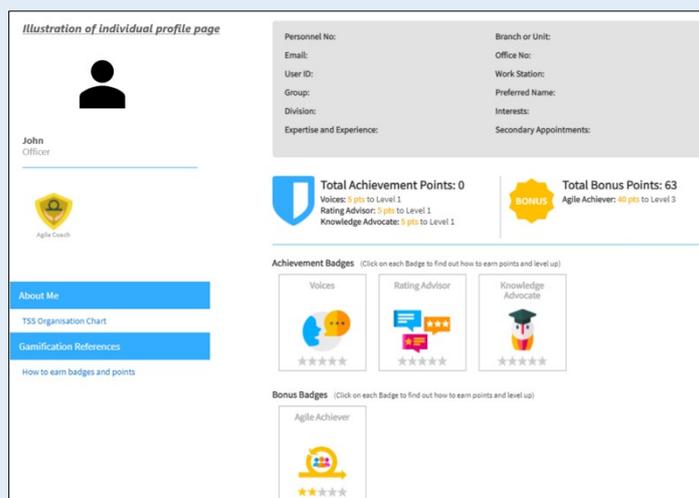
IRAS launched the **Agile@IRAS Dash campaign** to encourage early start and completion of Agile projects. Tapping on the gamification features on its intranet, IRAS awarded participants with bonus points upon reaching various campaign milestones, allowing them to redeem vouchers. Aside from incentivising through monetary rewards, IRAS also created an "Agile Achiever" bonus badge, where participants can level up to reflect their efforts on their individual profile page.

To provide enablers and assistance for officers to get started, IRAS set up an **Agile Support Group (ASG)**, a group of volunteers who are experienced with and passionate about Agile methodology to be Agile Coaches, to guide and advise new project teams in applying Agile principles and practices. To date, more than 15 teams received guidance from these coaches, promoting a peer-to-peer learning culture in IRAS. IRAS also designed an "Agile Coach" recognition badge and displayed it on the coaches' profile pages to recognise their expertise in Agile and reward them for their time and effort in guiding the teams.

² Scrum is a framework that helps teams develop, deliver and sustain complex products, designed to break the team's work into goals that can be completed within time-boxed iterations, called sprints.

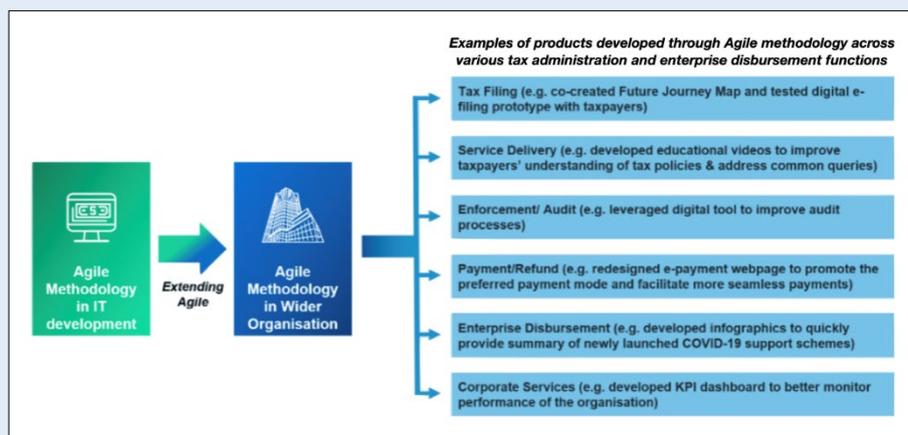
³ Kanban is a framework used to visualise and manage work as it moves through a process / workflow.

⁴ The 6 BCs are i) people-centric, ii) proactive development & adaptability, iii) analytical decision-making, iv) experiment & innovate, v) planning, organising and managing, and vi) collaboration & networking.



Source: Singapore – Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (2021)

The campaign attracted participation by over **90 Agile project teams comprising more than 300 officers** across various functions in IRAS within 1.5 months. These teams will adopt a time-boxed, iterative approach to deliver a wide range of products, including using data models, developing dashboards, redesigning external communication materials / websites to taxpayers, and reviewing existing processes and policies. IRAS will continue to increase participation in Agile cross-functional teams, as all IRAS officers would be required to complete an Agile capstone project as part of the BC+ programme.



Source: Singapore – Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (2021)

CONCLUSION

Agile is the new way of working. The application of Agile in projects has proved to be highly useful and rewarding. IRAS believes that Agile innovation can bring about a wide range of benefits to taxpayers and our officers. It will continue to support and promote the building of Agile capabilities within the organisation at scale.

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