

‘Getting the board on board’: The Secret of Saba’s Agile Success!

Organisation Background

Saba specialises in car park management as a benchmark industrial operator in the development of solutions in the field of urban mobility. The company manages car parks across nine countries and around 200 cities in Europe and Latin America, with over 333,000 car parking spaces in 950 car parks. The workforce consists of over 2,000 employees.



As Marketing Director of Saba, Sylvia Rausch has kick-started and driven a customer-centric, digital transformation. Here, she tells how an Agile way of working has been instrumental in the success of this transformation, which led to the company being recognised for ‘excellence in Agility in Marketing’ at the Agile Business Consortium 2023 Awards Conference.

Challenge

The company is continuously adapting its city infrastructures to customers’ new consumer habits and responding to the latest trends in sustainable urban mobility. It runs a network of car parks converted into mobility hubs (for electric vehicles, car-sharing), companies (providing dynamic solutions for fleets) and goods (sustainable last-mile distribution).

But when, as a response to huge changes within the industry and society in general, the company decided it was time to start actively selling car park services online, a whole new way of thinking was needed.

So *how* could they think differently? By adopting agility!

A digital transformation is a journey to continuously increase competitiveness by deploying technology at scale. Driven by top leadership, it challenges conventional wisdom and requires the collaboration of all functional teams to adopt new technology, new ways of working and to adopt change. Once started, this is a process that will carry on for years to come given the tremendous pace of innovation and the high levels of uncertainty companies must respond to in today's business context.

In the case of Saba, the digital transformation entailed an evolution from a finance-oriented 'infrastructure' mindset to one of sustainable urban mobility, putting the customer at the centre.

Sylvia explains the difference between these two mindsets:

"In our industry, active customer acquisition is not a given - people don't really yearn to park; it's just something they need to do, so it's like a hidden expense rather than a conscious act of consumption.

"As an infrastructure management company, our primary focus always had to be growth and operational efficiency rather than proactive 'top-line' management. But with the huge mindset change concerning climate change — cities actively moving towards policies restricting the use of private vehicles, and people actively adopting a more sustainable, conscious lifestyle, our mobility habits are changing and we have to up our game."

She continues: "We've always focused on the wellbeing of our customers while they are in our car parks, making sure we provide a good service there. Now, enhanced by 'Digital', the preferences of our customers have evolved dramatically and parking has become an integral part of people's 'mobility journey'. We now talk about 'parking experience', where sleek 'online'

shopping has to meet the brick and mortar reality of our car parks.

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"Last but not least, as explained above, we now actively look for new clients to use our car parks, which is a completely different matter and one made possible, once again, by technology. 'Digital' has enabled us to be in touch with thousands, even millions of previously anonymous users. And today, users expect to be able to easily interact with the companies they deal with online. "

Mobility, she highlights, has thus become 'an extremely dynamic ecosystem, very technology driven, populated by an incredible mix of companies and an imperative of radical customer-centricity — all new concepts we didn't have to worry about until a few years ago.'

She adds: "Our agile transformation wasn't Covid driven - it started in 2016 with a strategic decision by company directors to start selling online, but in 2016 not many parking companies



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were doing this so there was nothing we could copy! We just had to design our very own e-commerce from scratch!”

She explains: “As we started co-creating our digital front-end, we realised early on that we were not going to be able to go this alone and would need every single department in our company to help us and be part of this project. The transformation process that began therefore was twofold — a digital transformation on the one hand and a journey towards true customer-centricity on the other.

Challenge of the transformation to agile itself

As with any change of course, there was a natural challenge.

Sylvia explains: “It was our own choice to go agile. That is maybe unusual, but we were really driven, our motivation was so strong.”

She admits though that initially, working in an agile way felt as if it was adding work, rather than making it easier:

“We had to be disciplined in adopting all these new habits and we had to spend extra time filling in cards, writing user stories and getting used to new, ‘weird’ rituals.”

She confesses: “At first, we felt we weren’t making much progress in the sprints. “We had very few cards that moved to ‘done’ – the rest kept lingering ‘in progress’, and this was not how we thought it should be. The idea was that we’d do X amount of activity, which we would finish during the sprint, so they should all move to ‘done’.”

She highlights how working on User Stories was key to addressing this issue: “We realised the real challenge was to write user stories correctly — firstly to cut big tasks up into small tasks, small enough to get done.

“And we needed to use verbs, not just to write a title, because verbs tell you what to do – if you’re supposed to think about how to structure something, or if you’re supposed to write up something you have already structured, or to implement it, or negotiate an extra budget for it, so including the verb was a great finding for us. This still takes practice as it’s so easy to write a quick title and then, during sprint review, to realise you haven’t been specific enough.”

She acknowledges that making the decision to move to agile without an explicit mandate brought some challenges: “At first it felt like an undercover agile operation, but then, slowly but surely, as the results of our work became visible, that was no longer the case.”

She adds: “We have been getting a lot of help from our colleagues, for example, ‘People and Organisations’, among



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other departments. They considered our example helpful for their mission of driving the cultural transformation there. The award from the Agile Business Consortium was also greatly appreciated and we felt honoured to have been selected for this award, together with other leading companies in their fields such as NatWest Group and Save the Children UK.

Believe and you can achieve!

Sylvia explains how at first, she struggled to believe in her own agile expertise: “We practiced a bottom-up approach. We arranged a three-hour crash course in Scrum and got started on our own, without the structured support of an agile coach. So, for a long time, it all felt a bit ‘amateur’.to me.”

She adds: “I researched and read a lot and had long conversations with several seasoned agilists. For example, I had real doubts over whether it was legitimate to ‘tweak’ the rules the way we did to fit the team and our routine. Their feedback was really encouraging. They liked our story and were surprised at how we had started applying and evolving agile concepts in our industry. And as for the rules, as soon as I saw they worked



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for the team. I began to feel more confident and even more motivated!

“A big moment for me was the first post-Covid conference for the Agile Spain community. My colleague, who was involved in the organisation, suggested I apply as a speaker and our story was selected. I remember how I spent the first day of the conference listening to all the brilliant speakers and again, I wondered if I’d be up to the challenge, but my talk went really well, and I received amazing feedback! One outcome of that conference was that someone told us about the Consortium’s awards and encouraged us to apply.”

Solution

So was everything now ‘resolved’? Well not entirely...

Sylvia explains: “Our “agile” is a process, in constant evolution. As already established – it must fit the team. So, as the team grew and evolved, our agile framework had to adapt.

“When our Digital Marketing Manager, who had introduced us to agile in the first place, left, a new manager came in. As an engineer, he had a lot of experience in the digital and mobility areas, but had never worked in agile before, so he started to question our beloved rules and rituals!

“We did a retrospective to dig deeper and realized that our new team member made a lot of really good observations. For example, he felt lost with our ‘moving cards along’ and didn’t see the context. These observations led to positive changes.”

Sylvia expands on this: “Agile is end-goal focused and purpose-driven. Having a clear understanding of what needs to be achieved is key. So, we worked out together the main goals (‘themes’) and more detailed sub-goals (‘initiatives’) for our department and introduced quarterly review and planning sessions. We now review our objectives and how well we’re

achieving them every four months, making sure that everyone understands them and how they align with the overall company strategy.

“We also introduced the concept of EPICS (a series of user stories that share a broader strategic objective) to show how the cards were related. We defined EPICS to be a complex set of tasks that would take longer than one sprint and would require the collaboration of various team members. We now start our Sprint Reviews with reviewing the EPICS, and seeing how they are made up of the work of so many different team members really helps to see the importance and power of teamwork.”

She continues: “We also decided to try JIRA as our agile software, and we have been very happy with this change ever since.

“Last but not least though, while revisiting our ways of working we also realised that some team-members were not happy with what our Dailies had turned into. Probably as a result of the Covid ‘confined to home’ shock, our online Dailies had begun to take 30 minutes and contained a lot of superfluous detail, so, we decided to go back to a shorter, more focused version.

“We are by no means done however and do not consider we have achieved a definite version of ‘our’ agile. We will keep iterating!”

Result

So, what was the result of the transformation to Agility? Sylvia explains:

“Agility helped us build from scratch and then manage a successful, global e-commerce and associated digital ecosystem. It helped us strike a balance between working towards our strategic medium or long-term vision while focusing on quick wins with a short Time2Market, which would

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allow us to offer our clients some relevant value fast. We usually start with an MVP to start learning. Then we refine and adjust it and start to scale.

“I have no idea how everything would have worked out had we not adopted an agile mindset. For me, agility is intimately connected with the success of our digital transformation. It made everything transparent and our progress easy to track. And it ensured we remained focused on the value we generated for our customers. The agile way of working had a profound impact on the team.”

She recalls: “Initially we only had one digital team member, who got us started on this journey. In the process, all of us, and with very diverse backgrounds, grew and transformed by learning on the job and studying specialised Masters degrees, acquiring expertise in our fields of responsibility — content strategy, social media, e-commerce and marketing automation, SEO and performance, digital transformation strategy and so on. By doing this, we turned into a self-driven, autonomous, high-performing team.

“Working as a strong and united team is fundamental to agile and a priority for me. We have been very intentional based on the 3 Scrum pillars: Transparency, Continuous Inspection,

and Continuous Adaptation, bringing the Scrum values of Courage, Commitment, Openness, Respect and Focus to life. We have achieved a high degree of open and constructive communication amongst ourselves, allowing everybody to point out room for improvement without anyone feeling he or she is being criticised. I would say we feel that psychological safety is guaranteed.”

She adds: “I feel confident saying these things, as we regularly try to measure how we are doing as a team through different surveys or ‘health checks’ and the results have been improving over the years. Within the team, things like ‘trust’, ‘recognition’, ‘autonomy’ and ‘safety’ are consistently rated as high.

“As a result of all this work, I feel that Marketing has become a strategic function in our company as the industry has evolved and digitisation has become the ‘New Normal’ post-Covid. The value marketing can contribute and what we stand for is now much clearer.”

Advice to someone starting out on their marketing agility journey

So what would Sylvia recommend to others beginning their agile transformations?

She says: “The bottom-up approach, like ours, is tricky. I will always have a fond memory of the energy and conviction of those initial days, but you can’t pretend to be an isolated agile cell forever.

“That is neither efficient, nor impactful.

“It is essential you collaborate with the other stakeholders and other departments. You need to get your gatekeepers, your influencers and the board ‘on board’.

“A digital transformation like the one we are working on requires juggling a series of elements:

- Alignment around a credible and clearly worthwhile roadmap
- Building up foundational skills such as talent, technology, operating models – this is where agility comes in, and:
- Driving adoption and managing the change – to make it a success



“Agile has to help solve pain points and problems which are relevant for the company and generate customer-centric solutions that can be scaled, thereby creating value for our customers and for our company.”

Sylvia concludes: “It is important to find the right language, which in many cases will be a finance-oriented one, and to develop concrete business cases to clearly show the problems you can solve, the value you can achieve.

“It is important to launch an MVP, define the right Key Performance Indicator (KPI), track these transparently, iterate and hopefully enter a virtuous circle. This will take time —you need to build trust and credibility to ensure the resources needed for an ongoing effort and make it worthwhile.

“Thanks to the Agile Business Consortium, I have discovered that I was not the only agile professional facing the challenge of ‘how to get the board on board’ and that it is a common – and logical – challenge. So, the sooner you integrate this into your approach to driving agility, the better!”

How to find out more:

Biographies:

Sylvia Rausch is the Marketing Director of Saba. Sylvia has kick-started and driven a customer-centric digital transformation in an industry pivoting from “Infrastructure Management” to “Mobility”.

She considers the “Agile” framework that she discovered in 2016 and that she has applied ever since with the group’s global Marketing team and strategic partners to have been instrumental in this success. Putting the customer at the center, listening to her, and aligning the organization around these insights to assure on-going relevant value-creation have been at the heart of her professional career, in both B2B and B2C environments. A digital optimist, she declares “Constant Beta” her life philosophy.

Sylvia is Austrian and has been living in Barcelona with her husband and 3 now adult daughters for many years.

Agile Business Consortium:

The Agile Business Consortium is the leading not-for-profit professional body for promoting and enabling business agility worldwide. We work with partners and alliances to promote Agile practices, and to develop, curate and share Agile resources with the wider world. The direct descendent of the DSDM Consortium, we encourage an agnostic and client-centred approach to the use of Agile methods and frameworks.

We are the brains behind AgilePM[®], AgileBA[®] and AgilePgM[®] and organise the longest running Agile Business Conference in the world. With the support of APMG International we have accredited over 300 training organisations worldwide and certified over 150,000 Agile Project Managers, Business Analysts and Programme Managers; and we’re still growing.

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