dsm-firmenich Discovers Agility is the Best Approach for Digital Transformation

After struggling to enroll users, nutrition, health, and beauty specialist dsm-firmenich found that a collaborative, Agile implementation process was the key to gaining full participation in the company's research and development workflow.

- Empowered ownership to each lab

- Cut costs with easier system maintenance

- Enabled new integrations for innovation

About the company

dsm-firmenich is one of Europe's titans of scientific discovery and innovation, employing more than 29,300 people across 340 sites in 60 countries. The company operates four divisions: perfumery & beauty; taste texture and health; health nutrition and care; and animal nutrition and health. In 2023, dsm-firmenich achieved sales of more than €10 billion.

Learning From an Experiment That Fails

dsm-firmenich is familiar with transformation and agility. The original Firmenich company focused on fragrances and flavors, whereas DSM grew from the Dutch mining and specialty chemicals sectors. As a combined unit, dsm-firmenich is now a leading biotech innovator, investing in extensive research and development facilities in multiple arenas.

When dsm-firmenich originally selected Revvity Signals as its enterprise standard for research collaboration, the implementation project seemed straightforward, deploying the software using the tried-and-trusted waterfall methodology.

As Sylvana Suisse, Digital Project Lead within the Science Research & Innovation unit, describes how the company soon faced an uncomfortable reality: "Typically, waterfall methodologies follow a linear approach. So, you do development and after numerous lengthy iterations you may end up with a final product. For us, with our different units, that method meant eight workstreams at minimum, and each workstream needed multiple workshops get the user requirements defined and agreed."

The flaws of the waterfall method soon became clear. "We found that we were developing user requirements that were broadly good enough for implementation, but too average to be successful," continues Sylvana Suisse. "So, we did a lot of additional development. While we liked the process, nobody wanted this. In the end, we had created a general product that was not fit for purpose, and that led to a lack of trust and motivation. As a result, nobody wanted to touch the project anymore."

Rather than imposing a top-down solution, Sylvana Suisse realized that an Agile approach might be better-suited to a research-based company. The idea was to create a global set of implementation standards, and simultaneously offer each of the four main business units the opportunity to contribute their specific requirements.

"I enjoy the interface between the application of biotech on the lab and help shaping and implementing digital technologies that accelerate value creation from the lab experiments," Sylvana Suisse, Digital Project Lead within the Science Research & Innovation, dsm-firmenich"

We serve our researchers in what they do best; performing magic in the labs. We are driven to make life in the lab easier, and that is what we set out, once again, to do."

Re-organizing Along Agile Lines

The team re-organized its approach by asking each lab to appoint its own Product Owner, responsible for representing each team – in Sylvana's case, the analytics lab. The Project Owner

listens to ideas, requirements, and wish-lists, and translates them into 'stories' – a non-technical description used as the foundation for the technical work. The Agile methodology is based on short development cycles that aim to deliver functioning product configurations that can be tested and accepted, without trying to achieve perfection.

For dsm-firmenich, the process started with the analytics lab, working on a standardized or common core deployment of Revvity Signals Notebook. The Project Owner responsibility changed hands with each development phase, known as a 'sprint,' with fixed timings for each objective to avoid project bloat.

Unlike the centrally mandated waterfall deployment, other labs chose to join the project when they saw positive progress. While development, design and implementation were centrally funded, each lab nominated and budgeted for their own Project Owner.

"After a limited number of sprints, we had a working product, which allowed us to start on technical delivery, based on a global common core that everybody else would need to join and adhere to," comments Sylvana Suisse. "Then at one point the second unit wanted to join, and we then had a second product owner driving the sprints for their unit, from design to implementation, and then the third and fourth units wanted to join."

Using the Agile methodology, dsm-firmenich now has a standardized platform, Revvity Signals Notebook, for all its lab activities, configured to the unique preferences of each unit. As the fourth unit completed the onboarding process, the development and implementation project became a product maintenance and enhancement program – though still with a Project Owner leading the communications and sprints.

"In Agile, you work towards a working product, and not a perfect product, because nothing in life is truly perfect," says Sylvana Suisse. "For me, Agile was new, and I just had to trust that this would work. As a researcher in the lab, having trust in the process, I wanted to have the right data for decision making – but we just went with the flow. We shared our ideas, translated them into stories, which gave us the confidence that our voices from the lab were being heard. Then we saw those stories being pulled into a sprint, then planning, and finally into the product via the design and the configurations."
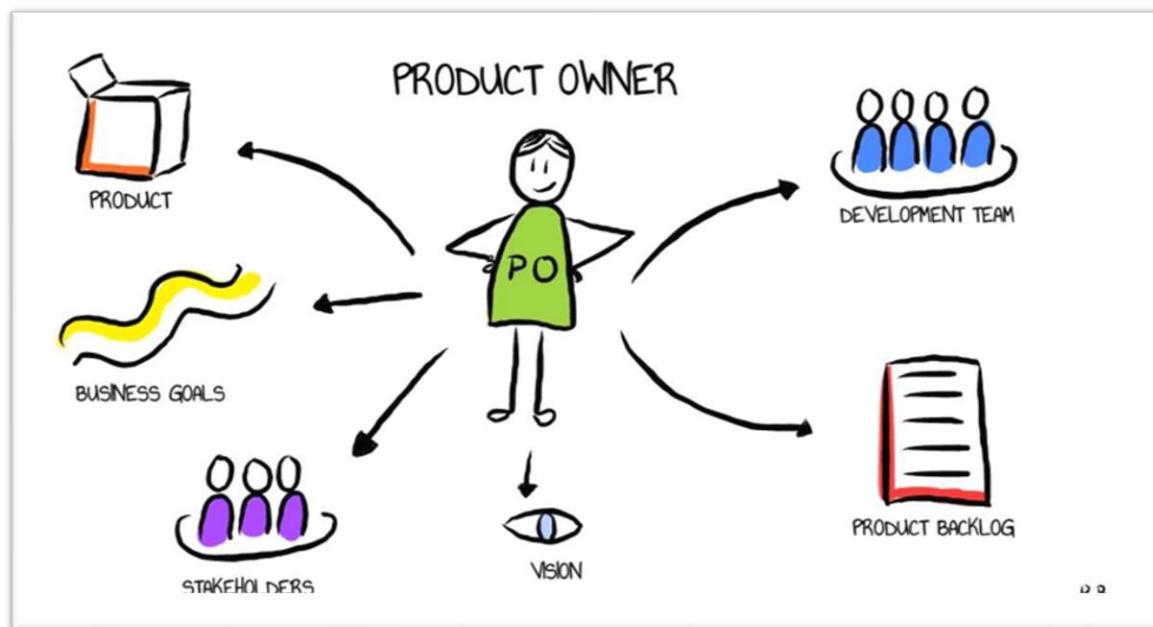
Figure 1 - Establishing an Agile approach was critical to the success of implementation at dsm-firmenich

Making Life Easier for Researchers

Revvity Signals Notebook is now the shared research platform throughout dsm-firmenich, closely configured to each business unit's specific operational practices. We're also adding new data sources and smart dashboarding, powered by embedded Spotfire functionality, to help us identify patterns and direct innovation and research more effectively.

By engaging with a Project Owner nominated by each business unit, dsm-firmenich has developed a sense of ownership from each lab, who can now actively participate in driving change. Sylvana Suisse concludes, "With Signals Notebook, everybody knows and follows the same standardized approach, but they also have the freedom to design their own local templates. Of course, there is always room for improvement and Revvity Signals makes it much easier for us to share ideas and discuss how we can move forward. Most of all, adopting an Agile approach has helped us to build an even stronger sense of community, which empowers our researchers to work more productively."
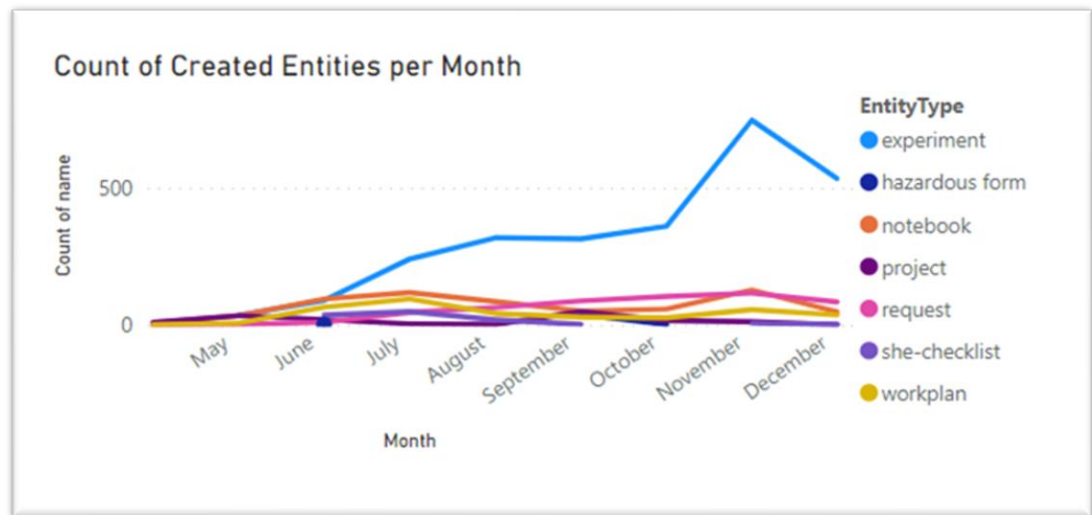
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Figure 2 - Graph showing adoption over time at dsm-firmenich

> *Signals Notebook is heavily used in our science and research labs, and we're building out further database integrations, because that's something that our scientists love," Sylvana Suisse, Digital Project Lead within the Science Research & Innovation, dsm-firmenich*

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