

## SAO Makes Inspiration Software More Agile More Quickly

The agile software development training from the Software Association of Oregon (SAO) was “so valuable and so affordable, we couldn’t afford not to go,” says Sid Snyder, software development manager at Beaverton, Ore-based Inspiration Software ([www.inspiration.com](http://www.inspiration.com)).

Well, it ought to be. Sid helped put it together.

### **Agile Helps Inspiration Software Build the Right Products**

Inspiration Software is the recognized leader in visual thinking and learning. With more than 25 million users worldwide, its award-winning software is revolutionizing visual thinking and learning for education, personal and business use. In particular, K-12 students use Inspiration Software products to develop strong thinking and organizational skills and improve their academic performance.

“People work at Inspiration Software because we are passionate about education,” explains Snyder.

Founded in 1982, Inspiration Software is one of the old-growth trees in the Silicon Forest. Since launching its flagship Inspiration software package in 1987, the company has developed several waves of enhancements and related products for PCs and mobile computers. Today, according to market research firm Quality Education Data (QED), a division of Scholastic, its products are in use in more than 60 percent of U.S. school districts.

But in the last few years, it became apparent to Snyder that the company would have to adopt agile software development to stay competitive.

Traditional software development is sequential: a product manager fully documents all the requirements for a product and then “throws it over the wall” for an engineering group to interpret and code. Agile software development employs more collaboration between the two groups, using a large number of iterations to implement, test, review and modify parts of the product. The result is typically a product that – through continuous feedback from users, customers or their surrogates – more closely matches market needs.

“Agile is a better approach for making sure we develop products that fit the customers. That’s our sweet spot – staying close to the teachers and students who use our software.”

### **SAO Makes Agile Training Local and Affordable**

“When we looked for agile training, we discovered that the courses were either prohibitively costly or not local – usually both,” says Snyder. “There are many local experts. But they are so good, they are usually training somewhere else in the U.S.”

Inspiration Software first tried sending three senior programmers to a three-day agile training session in San Diego. The plan was for these programmers to serve as trainers for the rest of the 20 people in Inspiration Software's product development group. The problem with that approach, beyond the high costs and schedule disruptions, was that those programmers were not trainers. Their interests and skill sets were rightly focused on coding.

Coincidentally, Snyder was contacted by Rachel Kjack, SAO's director of training and development, about serving on a committee to define training programs for the SAO membership. With his prior experience in standards committees, Snyder saw how he could serve the local technology community and, in the process, solve Inspiration Software's training challenge.

Working from federal grant money awarded the SAO, the committee organized an agile training curriculum by soliciting syllabi from local experts and winnowing down the many offerings into a cohesive set of courses – in particular, a week-long "Art of Agile" class. This program included two days for teaching the skills needed by product managers, and the other three days taught agile best practices for programmers.

"With its grant money and organizing clout, the SAO brought the top local experts at a very reasonable price," said Snyder. "We were able to get our entire team to the training, and still be home with our families every night."

### **SAO Training Makes An Immediate Impact in Inspiration Software**

When times get tight, some companies see training as an extraneous cost that can be cut. Not Inspiration Software. Moving to the agile development approach meant the company could create better products and keep its leadership and momentum in the market. Through the convenience and low cost of the SAO "Art of Agile" training, the return on investment (ROI) was fast.

"Often training doesn't result in a 'right now' impact. But I saw improvements in our process right away," says Snyder. "Many of the best ideas came from our engineers and QA staff, so they were invested in making them pay off. In fact, the people I might have expected to grumble about required training turned out afterwards to be our company's agile evangelists."

Through his work on the committee, Snyder can take some of the credit for the quality of the agile training. But it was the organizational reach and prowess of SAO that made – and continues to make – high quality local training available to the software companies of Oregon.

"The folks at SAO did a phenomenal job in organizing the training. In fact, my staff and I continue to go to supplemental training courses. We couldn't have come this far, this fast in agile development without the SAO."