

User group dying? Time to build a state-wide learning network!

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Is your user group struggling or are you trying to figure out how to even start a user group in your area? Find out how three agile user groups in Florida struggled to start and keep going and then turned things around by banding together. Within two years, we now have three thriving agile user groups that collaborate on everything from local user group development, statewide events and even launching other user groups! We'll talk about some of the different challenges these groups faced, some of the different ways they overcame those obstacles, share lessons learned, and how we built a state-wide learning network: AgileFlorida.com.

1. INTRODUCTION

Agile user groups started in Florida in 2008 and all were almost dead by 2010. By 2015, three groups were thriving with several hundred members each and three successful agile conferences. How did this turn-around occur? Basic agile principles, a common passion to share agile concepts and practices with others in our communities, and a strong desire to collaborate. In sharing our experiences, we hope that we will inspire others to start (or revive) their own agile user groups and keep in mind that collaboration is a powerful tool that can be used in many ways.

2. AGILE ORLANDO

Agile Orlando was a user group that rose out of the ashes of two previous failed attempts to start an group in the Orlando area. Eventually, it succeeded with the simplest things that could possibly work: lean coffee and the business model canvas.

First Iteration: In 2008, Mark reached out to individuals on LinkedIn that were in the Orlando area and expressed an interest in Agile. After a few lunch meetings and a tremendous enthusiasm, we launched Orlando Scrum. The name was chosen as we each had the most experience with Scrum and Scrum was already becoming the most marketed agile framework. Starting meetings in a local chain restaurant meeting room, the group quickly grew to over 50 members. We decided early on that all meetings would be free, sponsors would provide food and giveaways directly, and we would do our best to find local speakers who could talk about how they were using Scrum and agile in the real world with occasional outside speakers.

We learned some hard lessons from this first iteration of our user group:

- While Agile and Scrum, in particular, were becoming more popular worldwide, central Florida was not known as a software technology center at the time. It became difficult to attract significant speakers or interest. After 6 months, our numbers started to dwindle as we ran out of topics for evening meetups. In retrospect, we could have just continued to do a series of repeating agile introductions as agile was still new in the area. We could then have occasional special topics for continuing members
- Marketing became difficult. Social media had not really hit mainstream. Other user groups would help mention us, but several of them were struggling for attendance as well. We tried to reach out to the Tampa agile group also starting up around the same time for ideas and to collaborate on marketing, but they were also struggling.
- Because Scrum was becoming popular, our choice of name drew some unanticipated disputes both within the group and with other groups [1]. These disputes essentially ended the group in early 2009.

Second Iteration: Two of the original founders with another enthusiastic member tried to form the group again in late 2009 under the name Agile Orlando. With the help of this new member, we emerged on new social media platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr and Meetup and attracted approximately 30 members. However, we quickly found we were not aligned in purpose and commitment. We each wanted something very different for the group and what we wanted to get out of it. One leader moved away; another became a full-time “road warrior” (consulting) agile coach, and the Author's address: Mark Kilby, Orlando, FL; email: mark@markkilby.com
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remaining leader was left trying to run the entire group. The group slowly faded by 2011. However, with no events scheduled, people kept joining our meetup group. Interest in agile was growing in central Florida and Meetup.com was our information radiator that there was a group in Orlando, though dormant.

Third Iteration: At the end of 2011, we were 34 members. By December 2013, we reached 147 members. One year later, we had doubled to 303 members. Then by mid-year 2015, Agile Orlando has well over 400 members. What caused the dramatic turn-around? We set a clear vision of what Agile Orlando would be, how it would serve the community and did the simplest thing that could possibly work to achieve the vision.

Mark, the road-warrior coach, wanted to bring what he had learned on his agile transformation journeys with multiple clients back to Florida. But his travel made it difficult. A “minimum viable meetup” was needed. Having experienced a [lean coffee](#) [2] in a few cities, he reached out to some known agilists in Orlando, put notices on the Agile Orlando meetup group, promoted the group through Twitter and LinkedIn groups and just met with people. **Lean coffee** became an excellent opportunity to get anyone’s questions answered about agile. In less than 6 months, we had a regular core membership of 20 with many other occasional visitors. Eventually, the core group asked to restart Agile Orlando.

Getting the core group together over a couple of long lunches, a version of the business model canvas for learning communities was presented [3] and a new version for Agile Orlando was developed. Together the group focused on what was in it for each of them as well as the vision for the new Agile Orlando. This “community canvas” helped inspire several experiments to better understand who was attending and what they may need out of an agile user group. From this, we expanded to evening talks with industry-leading speakers, great local agilists sharing their stories, and lean coffees throughout different parts of the city to answer questions on agile. Mark even helped other groups to [start their own lean coffees](#). [4]

Speakers proved easy to obtain for Orlando at this time. By 2013, there were several agile trainers coming to central Florida as well as several local agile coaches. We would reach out to the trainers and ask if they wanted to talk about a highlighted portion of their class. Many potential speakers found this appealing and it brought in great topics for our members. Also, venues became easy to obtain with locations such as Starter Studio [REF?? <http://starterstudio>], a local startup-mentoring program that was becoming a tech community hub and provided their large meeting space to various user groups.

With the popularity of agile, sponsors were also coming to our group. There was a reluctance to establish a non-profit organization and establish too much structure up front. So we sought to understand what each sponsor wanted out of their involvement and had them pay directly for expenses while we helped sponsors achieve that value through their involvement with Agile Orlando. If they were a local recruiting agency, we let them introduce the agency and needs at our events and provide networking time so the recruiters could get to know members that may be job hunting. If they were an agile consultancy, we gave them an evening speaker slot or invited them as special guests to lean coffees and other events. If they were agile trainers coming to the area, we would promote their courses while arranging for discounts for our members. In each case, we designed each event to provide value to more than one stakeholder (members, sponsors and leaders). AgileOrlando would receive value, in turn, as these different stakeholders helped promote AgileOrlando in the Central Florida and agile communities.

One of the biggest shifts for AgileOrlando came through partnering. We reached out to other agile user groups in Florida and Georgia and across the country to find out what they did. In Florida in particular, we partnered with other agile groups across the state and with other Central Florida technical groups to co-promote our events and even collaborate. In particular:

- We partnered with the Orlando dotNet User Group in supporting and promoting their agile track for Orlando Code Camp
- We presented and co-promoted several events on lean and agile product management for the local Lean Startup Practitioners.
- We collaborated on multiple events with the central Florida chapter of the International Institute of Business Analysts (IIBA) that overlapped on topics of agile requirements and scaling agile to large enterprises.

The choice of collaboration was based more on common vision for the community and enthusiasm about introducing agile to different groups. We describe more of the collaboration with other agile user groups later in this paper.

3. TAMPA BAY AGILE

At Agile2007 in Washington DC, Mark Kilby (Orlando) Cory Foy (Tampa), and Patrick Morrison (Fort Lauderdale) met in an OpenJam session and decided to form AgileFlorida, a collaborative group for co-promoting agile in Florida. We established AgileFlorida.com to co-promote agile events across Florida. In late 2007, Cory Foy started the Agile Tampa group where he and others spoke on a variety of topics [5]. However, both the Orlando and Tampa groups faded by 2009 as Mark and Cory began to consult as agile coaches across the country.

In August 2011, a new group formed on Meetup.com by Salesforce.com development leaders with meetups initially hosted at the Salesforce offices in Tampa. The group was originally established as “Tampa Agile Developers”. Stephanie Davis of Valpak joined in March 2012 when the Meetup group still had less than 100 members and monthly meetups attracted less than 15 attendees. Stephanie helped the organizers to reconsider and broaden the scope of the group and it was re-established as “Tampa Bay Agile” to be inclusive of the entire bay area (not just the city of Tampa) as well as roles beyond just developers.

Stephanie became more and more active in each meetup and offered Valpak’s facility for meeting space. In addition, Ryan Dorrell of AgileThought (Valpak’s Agile Coach at the time) offered to help recruit speakers for meetups. By August 2012, Ryan had recruited Peter Saddington to speak on High Performing Teams at Valpak’s Community Room. Mark Kilby from AgileOrlando drove to this meetup as he knew Peter and wanted to meet Stephanie and Ryan to explore future collaborations.

By early 2013, the Salesforce.com development leaders that had founded the group asked Stephanie to take over as organizer. Stephanie in turn asked Ryan to be a co-organizer. Since March 2013, Tampa Bay Agile has consistently held at least one meetup a month as well as a sponsored holiday party each year. Throughout 2013, Stephanie and Ryan were very proactive in recruiting speakers and securing sponsors through their networks and LinkedIn groups. Valpak and AgileThought sponsored every other meetup through most of 2013. By 2014, Tampa Bay Agile had speakers and sponsors approaching them to get on their schedule. These days, very little effort is put into proactively recruiting speakers or securing sponsors as enough momentum has been established.

As of May 2015, Tampa Bay Agile has almost 900 members strong with close to 50 meetups hosted. Over 50 people on average attend these meetups. In addition to the regular monthly meetup, Tampa Bay Agile now hosts other events:

- **Lean Coffees** in two areas of the bay. Lean Coffees came about as a member-organized event based on an October 2013 presentation on how to grow a community with lean coffee by Mark Kilby
- The **Tampa Bay ScrumMaster Guild** acts as a sub-group to Tampa Bay Agile with the intention of keeping all things agile in one group in the Tampa Bay area. Our goal is to be more effective as one group as opposed to spawning many independent groups. Other leaders have emerged to run this event.

These other events came about as members asked for opportunities to collaborate and were willing to run these events themselves. Stephanie and Ryan assist by posting the events on Meetup.com and LinkedIn.

4. SOUTH FLORIDA AGILE ASSOCIATION

In December 2012, five individuals met at an open space held at an AgilePalooza event in Miami. They were excited by the promise of agile and they wanted to continue sharing what they learned as they continued on their agile journey. They found three others to join them in founding the South Florida Agile Association (SFAA).

The first SFAA meeting was held in January 2013 with 25 people attending. VersionOne sponsored the event and even provided beer. SFAA was off to a great start! Another meeting was planned the following month, and before long yet another meeting. We were on a roll for monthly meetings. Fast forward 2.5 years later. As of May 2015, South Florida Agile Association is over 1,000 members strong and hosts small, medium and large events.

Small events are hosted at least every other week and include book clubs, lean coffees and informal sessions attended by 15-40 people on average. We try and limit attendance to make them more intimate and move meetings around Broward, Dade and Palm Beach counties to encourage participation. Venues include Dunkin Donuts, corporate offices (Citrix, Cisco), and business incubators (Miami Venture Hive) and anyone's local office who can host.

In January 2014, Alex Kanaan (one of the co-founders) attended Agile Orlando's presentation about their Community Canvas and follow-up lean coffee conversations and that session jump-started SFAA's organization and gave birth to SFAA's future lean coffee meetups.

Medium events started in Jan 2014 with our Evening with a Guru series and usually have attendance between 80-150. These are held in various locations in South Florida and have included James Grenning, Ken Rubin, Bob Hartman, Sanjiv Augustine amongst others speaking on various popular topics. Venues included Carnival Cruise Lines, Citrix, IPC, Nova Southeastern University. We have also held free classes and workshops.

Larger events have transitioned to our annual conferences. The first large event was our High Performance Teams conference in October 2013. Held at the IPC offices, attendance was capped at 100 and quickly sold out. Speakers came from the local community sharing their experiences with agile practices as well as some outside speakers. Mark Kilby from Agile Orlando even came to present on conflict and collaboration in teams.

There was such demand that we decided not to wait an entire year. In May 2014, we held the first Agile Tools Summit (ATS2014). This was a larger venue at the main campus of Nova Southeastern University, which allowed us to have a vendor area and many sponsors. Some of the more popular tool vendors such as Rally and VersionOne attended as well as several local vendors specializing in agile consulting or recruiting. During ATS2014, our goal was 150 attendees, but registration exceeded expectations and was capped at 420 with almost 100 on the wait-list due to venue capacity.

Agile Tools Summit 2014 became Agile Transformation Summit 2015. In 2015 our goal was 500 attendees and we reached over 620. All of our large events have now been held at Nova Southeastern University and we have established an ongoing partnership with them that helps facilitate putting on these events. We also tap into Nova for "evening with a Guru" events, workshops, and classes, as its location is the most central in South Florida out of all venues.

Other local partnerships have included Code Camp and IT Palooza, South Florida's largest tech event hosted every December. As we gained more recognition, we were given an independent Agile Track that we now manage in these events.

One of our barriers to operate had been a way to collect funds from sponsors, so we incorporated as a non-profit in April 2014 and opened our bank account. That has facilitated how we collect funds and sponsorship money. To date, we have raised over \$30,000 in sponsorship funds for ATS2015. We are still investigating the cost/benefit of a 501c3 not for profit status.

We are also eager to exchange ideas with and be part of other Agile Florida groups and are part of the annual Agile Open Florida conference since the beginning.

5. HOW WE COLLABORATE

In late 2012, the Florida agile groups started to discover each other via Meetup.com, social media and email. We started attending each other's events and eventually speaking at each other's events (as was previously mentioned). Next, we started to share information on "speakers" that we were contacting for presentations. We also co-promoted each other's events and blogs. Eventually, this co-promotion resulted in the re-launch of AgileFlorida.com [6] with the prompting of Mark Kilby, help of Cory Foy and Ryan Dorrell's team at AgileThought, and website design and Wordpress configuration by Stephanie Davis. This site picks up the Meetup.com RSS feeds for events from all the agile user groups across the state of Florida.

In early 2014, the organizers of Tampa Bay Agile and Agile Orlando organizers decided to hold an Open Space Technology [7] conference in Florida. Recruiting the help of Ainsley Nies and the Agile Alliance Agile Open

program [8], they met monthly via phone and web meeting to plan the details and finally held the first Agile Open Florida at the Valpak Manufacturing Center to almost 150 attendees [9]. Several members of South Florida Agile Association attended and brought tremendous energy to the sessions. The second iteration, Agile Open Florida 2015 has been through collaboration between Tampa Bay Agile, Agile Orlando, and South Florida Agile Association (SFAA) organizers, a.k.a. Agile Florida. This year, Agile Open Florida 2015 is sold out over a month in advance to over 150 attendees with over a dozen sponsors [10]. The popularity of this event has prompted Tampa Bay Agile to incorporate as a non-profit as well to collect sponsor and registration fees more easily.

6. WHAT WORKED? (LESSONS LEARNED)

Each of our groups had a vision to share the benefits and techniques of agile in our local community. We can sum up our lessons learned with three words: **Connect, collaborate, and co-promote**. If you focus on these activities, you can be very successful in growing your own user group and growing a network of groups that help support each other. Some specific ideas:

- **Collaborate - Pair or Partner to run your group:** Each of the agile Florida user groups had co-organizers that planned and co-facilitated events. This allowed one leader to take a break for a while. Always collaborate when running your group.
- **Connect with other user group leaders - Meetup.com, LinkedIn and social media:** LinkedIn, Twitter, and Meetup are great tools for getting your group started and promoted, but there are other ways you can use these social media tools to help you as the leader of an agile user group.
 - Join other technology groups in your area via Meetup.com to get updates on what they are doing
 - Reach out to their leaders to see if they are interested in planning events together; get connected with them on social media and help promote their events to your members if you feel they would be interesting. You can easily find the organizer on Meetup.com and most will have links to Twitter or LinkedIn profiles. From there, you can find their contact information. Be respectful of their time (keep the message short), acknowledge the great work they are doing, and be clear and brief on what you would like to suggest (e.g., buy them lunch to share ideas on how to run the group; co-promote events; collaborate on an event)
 - See how the other groups communicate with their members
 - You may even want to attend events that sound different like a “nerd dinner”, “bits and beers”, or a pecha kucha night to get inspiration for new types of events
 - Offer to give an introductory presentation on an agile topic of interest to the other group. Ask if they would present at your group as well.
 - Join agile meetups in other cities (especially cities nearby) via Meetup.com
 - Find out who is speaking and reach out to the speakers to see if they would like to give their talk in your city. Better yet, ask the leaders of those agile groups to introduce you.
 - Do all the same things we described above for connecting with other groups in your city
 - Road trip to the gemba - actually go attend an agile meetup in another city; this seems like a big commitment, but it pays off tremendously as you get to meet agile leaders in another city and actually see how they run their meetups. It also can give you ideas and also you may have some useful ideas for them to share. I also find these leaders are very appreciative that you have taken the time to visit them from far away and are willing to invest some additional time. It is sometimes useful to set up a call with these leaders before or after the event to talk about why you want to attend their meetup. They may use that information to introduce you to others in their group or community that can help you.
- **Connect with industry leaders**
 - While founders such as Mark, Ryan and Stephanie had connections in the agile community; you can build these connections as well. Always be respectful of their time and be very concise and clear in any communications with them what is in it for them to collaborate with your group and what type of collaboration you are asking for (speaking at an evening event of conference, discounts to their upcoming course, arranging for them to hold their course in your area, etc.)

- Connect with industry thought leaders and well-known speakers and trainers via social media. Go through their slides on Slideshare.com or watch their talk on YouTube.com or Vimeo.com to see if they would be good speakers for your group. Let them know via social media that you like their work and ask if you can contact them.
 - Use online groups like the multiple LinkedIn agile groups to ask for speakers for your meetup. You can end up booking evening events as far as 4-6 months out this way.
 - Check the Scrum.org, ScrumAlliance.org and Lean Kanban University trainer schedules to see who may be coming to your area. Contact those trainers 3-6 months in advance to see if they would want to speak at your user group. If they have multiple trips planned to your city, invite them to speak at one trip to promote their return visit. This will hopefully make their marketing easier and encourage them to come speak again.
 - Find out what agile or other conferences members are attending. Ask them to reach out to the thought leaders and speakers they attended and liked to provide a presentation for your group.
 - Research the speaker programs at Agile Alliance, Scrum Alliance and related groups to view their directory of speakers and learn about their speaker reimbursement program [11].
- **Collaborate on events:**
 - Nervous about hosting a new type of event? Pair with another organization that has tried something similar (or willing to try it)
 - Cannot get many people to your event? Connect, collaborate and co-promote with another user group.
 - Support other groups you are partnering with by attending some of their events. It's also a great opportunity to network with members and tell them about your group.
- **Collaborate on a variety of events**
 - No matter how hard you try, you will not find a single time or format on a monthly basis that works for all of your membership. Provide a variety of events and times: Morning versus evening. Weekday versus weekend. Talks versus interactive sessions. Speaker versus panel. Organizer-led versus member-led (e.g., lean coffees)
 - Give others the opportunity to try out ideas for new events. If a member suggests a new type of event, ask if they are willing to pair with you to get it started or just co-promote the new event.
- **Just stay Connected**
 - The leaders of the Agile Florida user groups stay in touch by connecting via phone, email, or social media every few weeks. We swap stories, tell about exciting developments, and we share challenges. The encouragement and support of these colleagues is a tremendous inspiration when facing challenges running your user group.
 - Similarly, stay in touch with the leaders of other groups in your area where you have regular collaborations. Update each other on developments within your groups and frequently exchange ideas on how you can collaborate or identify new groups and organizations to seek out as collaborators or sponsors. Sometimes it may be a brief meeting at each others' events or a longer conversation over beverages or a meal.
 - Regardless of how you do it, it is extremely beneficial to you and your fellow leaders to just stay in touch on a regular basis. Think of this step as Anzeneering for your community [12]. You want to make it safe for leaders to try new things to build their groups and the community.

7. WHAT'S NEXT?

At the OpenJam of the Agile2014 conference in Orlando, the leaders of AgileOrlando, Tampa Bay Agile and South Florida Agile Association met with others interested in growing the agile community in Florida. This resulted in the launch of Agile Gainesville in fall 2014 and the re-launch of AgileFlorida.com in the winter of 2014 as described previously.

In late 2014, one of the past speakers at AgileOrlando introduced the AO leaders to an individual in southwest Florida to start a possible fifth Florida agile user group. Word was getting out through the agile community about Agile Florida and how we could support other groups in starting.

Since then, we have looked into other ways we can support other agile user groups to get started or expand their collaboration including:

- Virtual meetups with other user groups both inside and outside of Florida
- Share stories of how we started, how we grew, and how we are maintaining our groups via blogs and podcasts.
- Submitted a proposal to Agile Alliance for a Local User Group Support program for other groups looking to start or others that are struggling. Our ultimate goal is to provide a support network for other agile user group leaders so that they can develop their own groups and networks about improving the world of work through agile principles and practices.

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