MEISTERPLAN

Bridge the Gap Between Management and Agile Teams in Just Three Steps

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Introduction

Agile work brings many benefits: greater focus on the top priorities, increased productivity, and a better ability to adapt and react to changes. Agile started in software development, and many development teams still use Agile. However, more and more organizations are implementing Agile methodology beyond their development and IT departments to extend the benefits that comes with Agile to more areas of the organization. Yet, there are very few companies that are 100% Agile. There is usually a mix of traditional, hybrid and Agile methodologies used throughout each organization. This mix of project management methods is actually beneficial because different teams can work in different ways that suit them best.

But what about when making portfolio decisions? How does senior management or the portfolio decision-makers get the transparency they need across all work being done in their organization? In particular, how do they get a single view of both Agile work and more traditional projects to know what's going on, make informed decisions and prioritize what should be worked on next across the entire organization?

Often, management thinks in a more traditional way. In other words, they think in terms of projects. They are used to being able to find out a project start date, completion date, milestone, dependencies, how many people or resources are needed for the project, whether or not a project is aligned to the corporate strategy, etc. They use that information to prioritize projects, make decisions and create a future roadmap of what work needs to be done.

Management wants to fit Agile work into a similar box. They want to find out the current status of the work, when it will be completed and when new items can be added. However, Agile teams don't think in terms of projects. They work with a thematic backlog organized from top to bottom in terms of priority. These teams use Agile to be the most productive and accomplish the highest priority items in the least amount of time possible. For them, planning out a long-term roadmap may seem the opposite of Agile.

Agile Teams Think One Way.
Management Thinks Another.
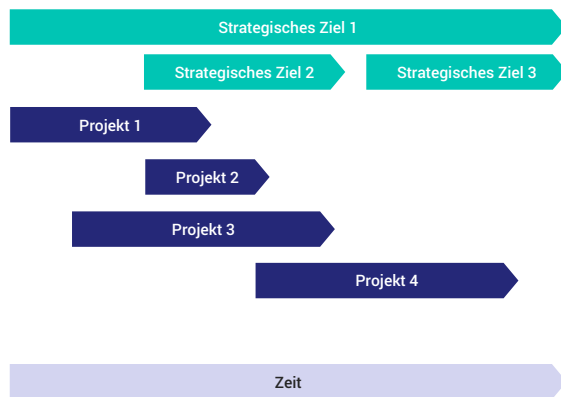**How Do We Bridge the Gap?**

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The Way Management Plan vs. the Way Agile Teams Plan

How Management Plans

Agile has been a buzzword for quite some time, and many organizations talk about or attempt to complete Agile transformations. It may seem like a huge revolution is happening. However, we believe that when it comes to management not so much has changed:

✓ Good management has always been able to respond to changing conditions.

✓ Good leadership has always fostered the strengths of individuals.

✓ Good organizations have always been focused and ready to adapt to the tasks ahead.

Let's focus on the core tasks of management: defining and implementing the company's strategy.

Strategisches Ziel 1
Strategisches Ziel 2   Strategisches Ziel 3
Projekt 1
Projekt 2
Projekt 3
Projekt 4
Zeit

How do we define good planning at the management level?

Management is responsible for the medium to longterm development of the company.

To do this, they need to identify and prioritize important topics or projects, as well as estimate the timing and resources needed to accomplish them. They also need to flexibly adapt these plans to new circumstances, communicate planning decisions and guide people.

Because management is responsible for strategic planning, they have to make decisions in a broader context.

There are often many different areas of the organization with different activities and goals. They need an overview of everything to ensure they can think through different scenarios in order to make meaningful decisions across the organization.

Management may need to intervene at an operational level under certain circumstances.

This will require having transparency into specific operational details, a necessity if they are to take the right actions.

What Distinguishes Good Management?

✓ Good managers try to make realistic plans – in large part to ensure they can deliver on their commitments.

✓ Good managers don't make the decisions alone, but work together with others to make the best decisions.

✓ Good managers understand when they can get best offer support, and when they lack the expert knowledge and should rely on expert colleagues to take care of operational issues.

✓ Good managers are available for open and sometimes even uncomfortable communication with strong teams.

Difficulties between Agile teams and management usually arise from the first item in this list – creating realistic plans. Agile teams do not work with classic deadlines, and "It's done when it's done" doesn't exactly help managers make realistic roadmaps. Fortunately, the answer to this challenge is also in our short list for good management – don't make decisions alone, but instead make sure you are available for open communication with the teams. Good communication includes the ability to put yourself in the other person's shoes. So let's do that now, let's look at the Agile teams.

How Agile Teams Plan

There are hundreds and hundreds of articles on how Agile teams work. These articles are great for explaining how Agile development works from the perspective of an Agile team. What about from the perspective of a "regular" organization? Or one that has both traditional project teams and Agile teams?

Here is our explanation for traditional teams and management to understand how Agile teams work:

Agile teams don't use projects, at least not in the traditional management sense where projects include a predefined scope and milestones.
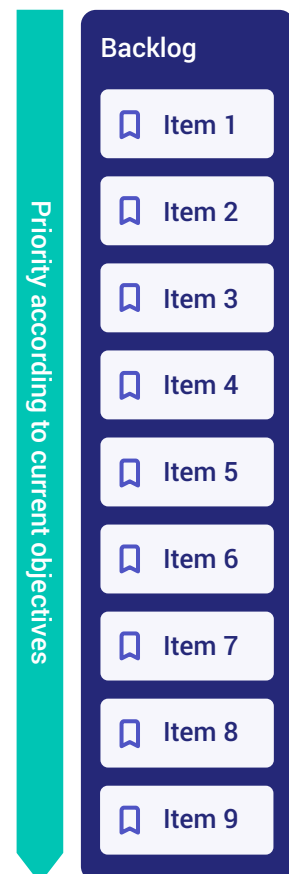
✓ Agile teams work on an objective and develop a product or service in regularly scheduled steps.

✓ They also use what we'll call sub-objectives known as "User Stories", which are prioritized in a backlog and are completed from top to bottom until the objective is achieved from the user's point of view.

> **Agile teams never commit to completing specific objectives by certain dates.**

Agile teams make decisions independently.

✓ Only the Product Owner (a single person within the team, not a committee or outsider) determines the bundling, prioritization and detailing of content. This is typically done in what is called the Backlog Grooming Meeting.

✓ Only the team determines the actual scope within a working cycle (called a Sprint).

> **Agile teams work over a long period of time as an interdisciplinary group** (typically consisting of department representatives and developers).

Priority according to current objectives

Backlog

🔖 Item 1

🔖 Item 2

🔖 Item 3

🔖 Item 4

🔖 Item 5

🔖 Item 6

🔖 Item 7

🔖 Item 8

🔖 Item 9

Agile teams are very successful with this approach. However, they still also incorporate or use many traditional management approaches:

> The Product Owner makes a "plan" by prioritizing the topics in the backlog based on the clients' requirements and adjusts expectations to the scope.

> For Agile teams, each Sprint is basically a small project (with a fixed duration, fixed capacity, a coordinated goal, and an expected scope determined by the team itself).

> Larger objectives are worked on within releases consisting of several Sprints (a clear analogy to a project with partial steps).

> There may be a number of "supporting actors" (other project participants) who will be asked to participate as needed, such as a technical expert from another team.

Is There Really a Gap?

As you can see, these are not insurmountable obstacles. With these three simple steps you can bridge the gap between management and Agile teams:

1. Let's just call them projects: Establish the "project" as the common term to use for the work being accomplished.

2. Use Lean PPMTM as a simple, common decision-making process: Integrate Agile teams into your regular planning processes.

3. Use Meisterplan for Jira as the planning tool: Create a technical decision-making platform for all portfolio decisions.

Step 1

Let's Just Call Them Projects

Managers and Agile teams both want the right topics to be worked on. Agile teams prioritize all backlog topics and work on them from top to bottom. They focus on the question of what is the next meaningful step and how can it be successfully achieved.

Management also wants to ensure that the next step is achieved successfully.

However, their planning focuses on different points, such as the completion date of the whole project and how the project aligns to the corporate strategy in relation to other projects. This determines priorities and use of resources.

So how do we effectively plan together with these different perspectives?

What if we look for some common ground? Couldn't we just call the topics in the backlog projects? To look at backlog items as projects, they are often simply spread out and displayed in a roadmap view. Does that work? Could it be that simple?
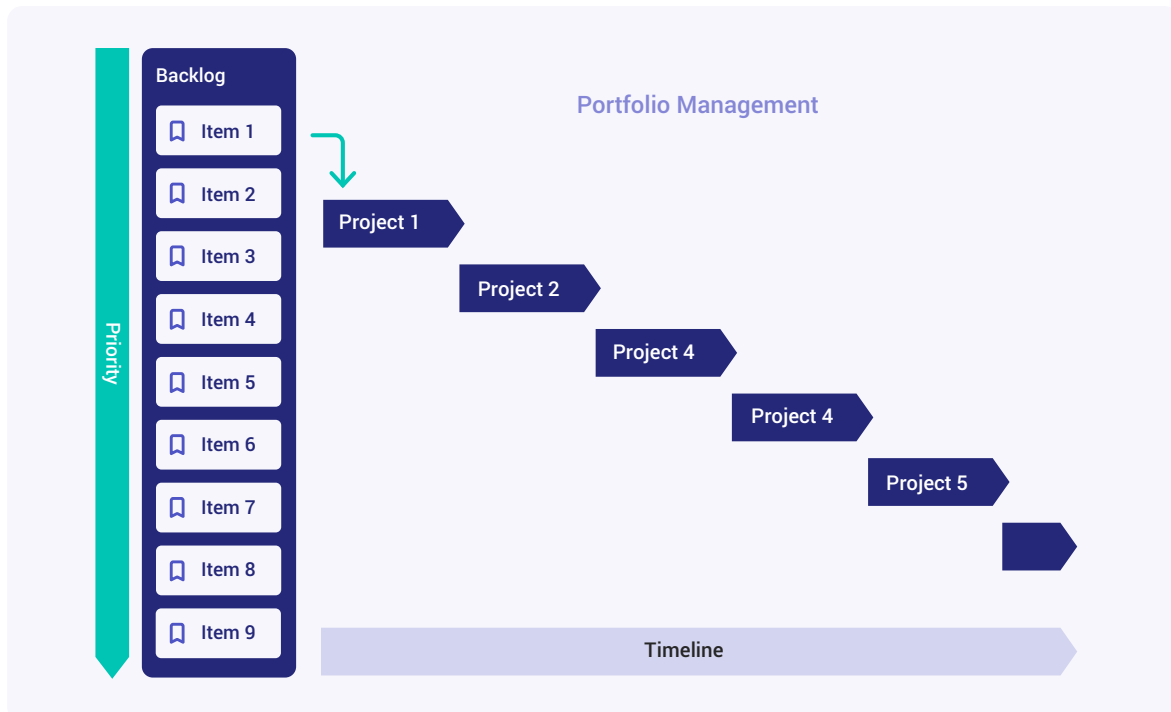
Let's quickly think about the strengths of the Agile approach: Agile teams work on a topic and prioritize everything up to the next step, review whether they were successful and take the next step. They prioritize and plan the best they can for the short period of a Sprint. However, the deeper you look into the backlog, the more unclear it becomes whether the priorities are still valid.

Your company no doubt also pursues several goals, and has several backlogs and/or traditional projects that need to be planned. To put it bluntly: it is not enough to just spread your backlog out across a timeline.

- Backlogs are never completely prioritized. They get further prioritized during each Sprint planning.

- It is very rare to use several objectives when prioritizing each topic in the backlog.

- External dependencies aren't concretely considered until planning for the upcoming Sprint.

- There is no comparison made to ensure consistency between the Product Owner's bottom-up planning and management's top-down planning.

A Better Way – Packaging the Backlog into Projects

The basic idea of putting a prioritized backlog on a timeline is not wrong. It's how it is done that matters. A fully automated solution like spreading the backlog out is not the answer. Instead, a collaborative process is needed where the Product Owner and Portfolio Manager take the backlog or backlog items and "build" projects from them. We call this process "packaging".

Projects are no longer a simple chronological sequence of backlog items. Instead, they become the best possible steps to achieve a strategic goal. Projects are packaged based on both management's strategic guidelines and the Agile team's expert knowledge regarding how to achieve objectives.von agilen Teams paketiert.
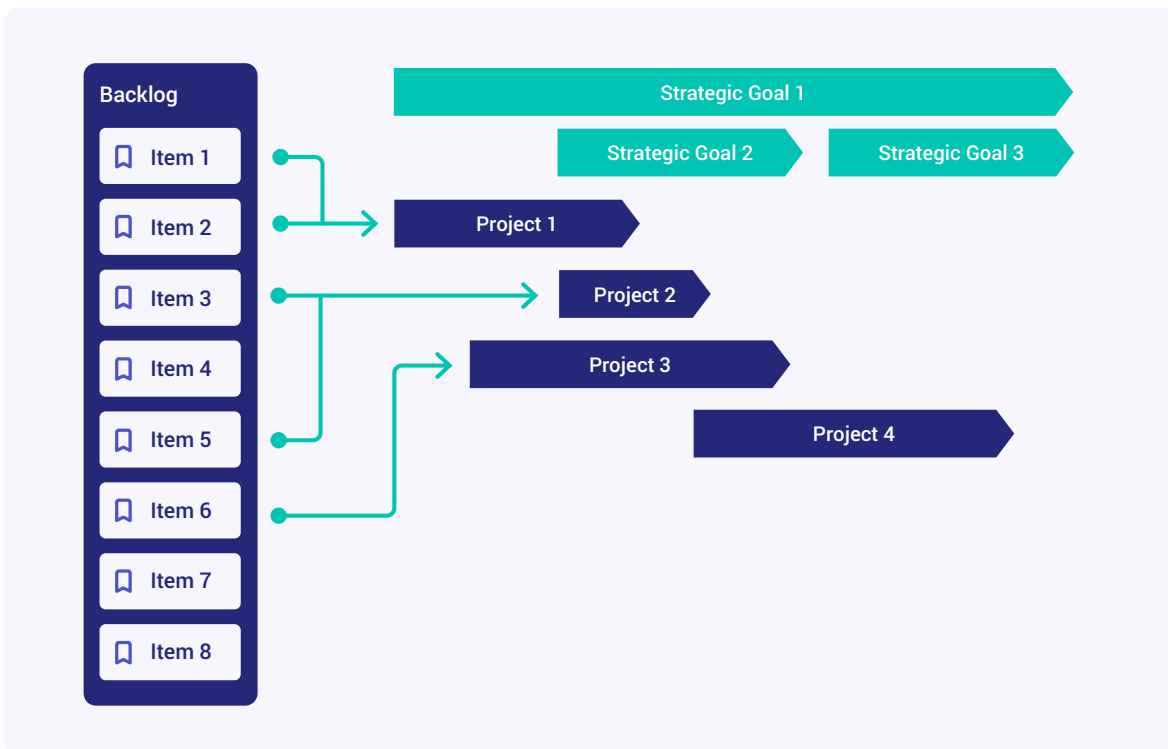
The communication process used in packaging is the key. It creates common ground for the project to be discussed on the same level, ensuring the planning is understood by both sides, and enables senior management to make decisions. The involvement of the Product Owner in the process ensures that the Agile teams can make their own decisions in the strategic context of the company.

Packaging the backlog into projects can only be successful if you keep it up. Goals change, alternative ways to achieve goals arise and Agile teams come up with new ideas that need to be evaluated in the context of existing plans and goals. It is always important to replace the last plan with an even better one. To deal with this constant change, you embed the packaging of backlog items firmly into an iterative planning process.

Schritt 2

Lean PPM™ as a Simple, Common Decision-Making Process

Lean PPMTM is a framework you can rely on for your decision-making process. It can be used no matter what project management methods and tools your teams use (yes, even Agile!). Lean PPMTM integrates the strengths of Agile and non-Agile methods at the portfolio level, letting teams do their work the way they want.

We call it lean because this framework only focuses on the most value-adding activities in portfolio management and gets rid of unnecessary meetings and large overhead. It establishes a regular decision-making flow, with the right levels deciding on the right topics (i.e., management decides on the portfolio, and the teams decide on implementation). It's easy to introduce because it requires only minimal changes on the team level.

A Dynamic System for Prioritizing Topics and Allocating Resources

Strategize

Collect

Decide

Execute

The goal of Lean PPMTM is to create an integrated overall plan that can be realistically achieved. To do this, the company's activities including projects and Agile work must be aligned to corporate strategy and available resources (i.e., people). Lean PPMTM is a dynamic system because there are constant changes both in the pipeline when new project ideas come up and in delivery when circumstances change and aspects to the project such as timeline or resources have to be adjusted.

The good thing about implementing Lean PPMTM is that you are likely already doing most of the activities that are part of the framework.

For instance, you probably have a regular meeting where you discuss the status of current work, look at the project pipeline and merge the two views into a forward-looking project portfolio. In the Lean PPMTM framework, the name for this meeting is the Portfolio Board meeting. We recommend that you use our free templates to help you easily map your meetings and activities to the Lean PPMTM framework ensuring that you are not missing any roles or meetings and that everything is happening in the right order. These templates can be found here: https://meisterplan.com/templates

Include Agile Work in the Portfolio

Collect	Proposal Coaching	Proposal Coaching	Proposal Coaching	Proposal Coaching	Proposal Coaching
Decide		Strategy Workshop	Pipeline Review	Portfolio Board	Communication of Portfolio
Execute	Resource Conflict Resolution	Resource Conflict Resolution	Resource Conflict Resolution	Execution Steering	Resource Conflict Resolution

Now we can specifically discuss how to integrate Agile teams into this process.

In a regular **strategy workshop**, the corporate strategy is translated into evaluation criteria for the selection of projects and topics. Here, the Product Owner gains an understanding of the priorities and can make adjustments accordingly.

The composition of the overall portfolio is decided during regular **Portfolio Board meetings**. Specifically, this means that in this meeting they answer the question of "which topics will we focus on, using which resources and when?".
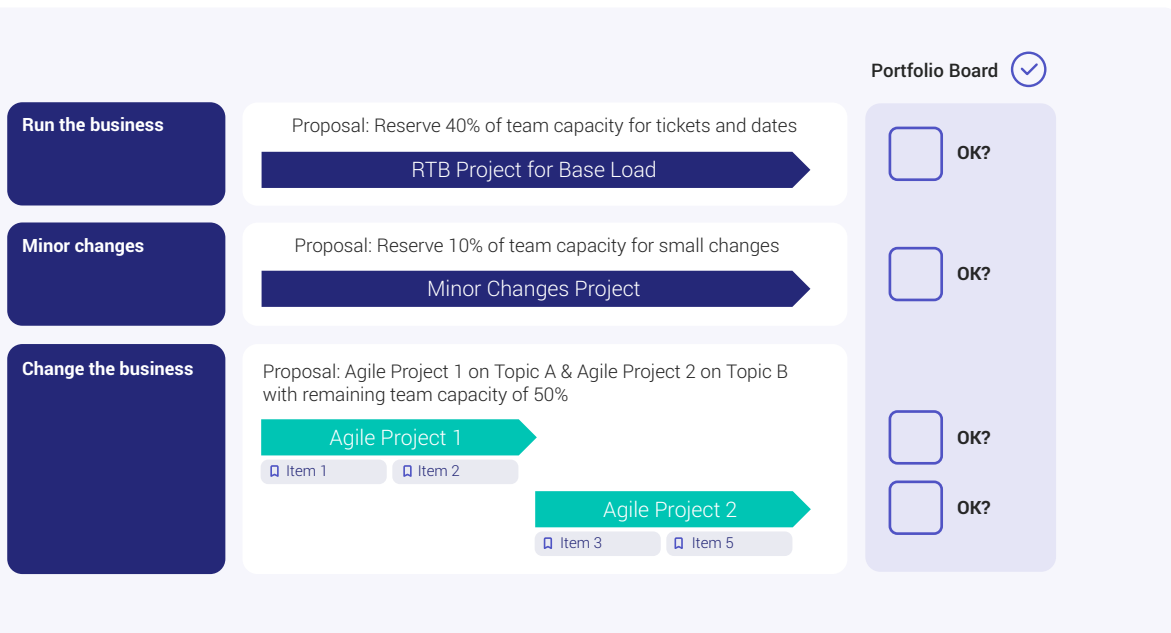
Based on the agreed upon strategy, the Product Owner contributes a proposal for the **topics and resource distribution** for the next planning cycle. Specifically:

> How much of the team's capacity will we use for run-the-business (daily business) work?

> How much team capacity do we use for minor changes? (For minor changes, the Product Owner has absolute control over the content.)

> Which major topics do we want to address when (this often corresponds to the major Epics or releases in Jira), and what is the scope? (number of Sprints, capacity, story points, or effort)?

The big issues are discussed in detail in the Portfolio Board meeting.

✓ The "Definition of Done" (DoD) is the project goal.

✓ The decision of which teams to assign to the project is made.

✓ The duration is measured for the next planning cycle, but there is no definitive "delivery date".

✓ The rrequired experts are roughly assigned to Sprints based on when their expertise is needed.

✓ The scope is set according to what can be achieved with the capacity planned during this period (concrete stories).

✓ If estimates are not yet available, the DoD can be used as the scope and the duration can be estimated (e.g., 2-3 months or a 100 story points).

Further activities (marketing campaigns, internal training, etc.) can then be planned around these major topics. These activities often run as classic projects. The fact that it is so easy to combine Agile work and traditional projects in the portfolio planning process is one of the great advantages of Lean PPM™..

Portfolio Board ✓

Run the business	Proposal: Reserve 40% of team capacity for tickets and dates RTB Project for Base Load	☐ OK?
Minor changes	Proposal: Reserve 10% of team capacity for small changes Minor Changes Project	☐ OK?
Change the business	Proposal: Agile Project 1 on Topic A & Agile Project 2 on Topic B with remaining team capacity of 50% Agile Project 1 — Item 1, Item 2 Agile Project 2 — Item 3, Item 5	☐ OK? ☐ OK?

An Overview of the Most Important Lean PPM™ Activities for Agile Teams:

Strategy Workshop

✓ Translation of corporate strategy into evaluation criteria

✓ Product Owner: understand priorities

Pipeline Review

✓ Product Owner: check the alignment of backlog items to the current goals

✓ Product Owner: package backlog items into projects/topics

Portfolio Board

✓ Decisions made on the composition of the overall portfolio

✓ Product Owner: topics and resource allocation proposed

✓ Subsequent Communication: Product Owner reprioritizes backlog
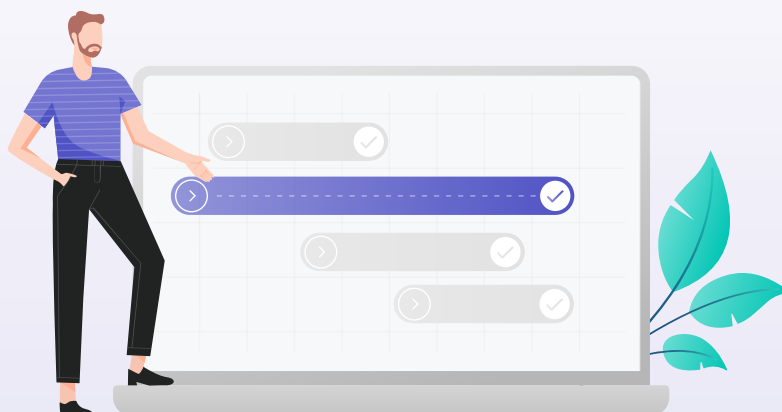
Step 3

Meisterplan for Jira – the Planning Tool

In the first step, you established the "project" as the basis for joint strategic planning, and in the second step you created a regular planning process using Lean PPMTM.

In the third step, we will show you how to efficiently connect management and Agile teams working in Jira with the Lean PPM™ software Meisterplan.

1. The Product Owner packages the team's backlog items (EPICs/Releases/Projects/ Stories) that should be considered in the Portfolio Board meeting into projects.

2. They make rough suggestions for team allocation and duration (e.g., they may state the duration in months, or before/after topic X).

3. Meisterplan calculates which stories are expected to be finished with the suggested team allocation and duration.

4. Meisterplan estimates how long it would take this team to complete the full scope.

5. Management and the Product Owner together in Meisterplan can simulate different scenarios, such as determining when a topic can be completed if a second team is added.

6. You can always clearly see what is already finished and what is expected to be finished, and can coordinate directly with the Product Owner if required.

This allows management and Product Owners to compare and align their respective plans. Meisterplan directly accesses data in Jira, visualizes it and makes it available for portfolio planning.

Link Meisterplan Project to Jira   LINK USING JQL

Select the epic you want to link to the selected Meisterplan project.

Filter by Jira Project ▼   Filter by Epic Status ▼

Search by Epic Name or Key

Jira Epic Name ↑	Key	Status
Data Import Wizard	PD-3	To Do
Mobile App	PD-15	To Do
Onboarding Wizard	PD-4	To Do
UI Overhaul	PD-1	To Do
User Management 2.0	PD-5	In Progress
Webshop Integration	PD-2	To Do

LINK PROJECT   CANCEL

In the first step, you established the "project" as the basis for joint strategic planning, and in the second step you created a regular planning process using Lean PPM™.

Or you can package your elements from Jira and link them together in a Meisterplan project.

Link Meisterplan Project to Jira   LINK USING EPIC LIST

JQL Query

"Epic Link" = "Project Atlantis" AND "Team" = "Green"

PREVIEW RESULTS IN JIRA

LINK PROJECT   CANCEL

Now It Is Much Easier to Answer Very Important Questions:

> What can we achieve with the current capacity in the set duration?

> or How much capacity do we need to finish the topic in a certain time frame?

> or How much time do we need to finish the topic with the current capacity?
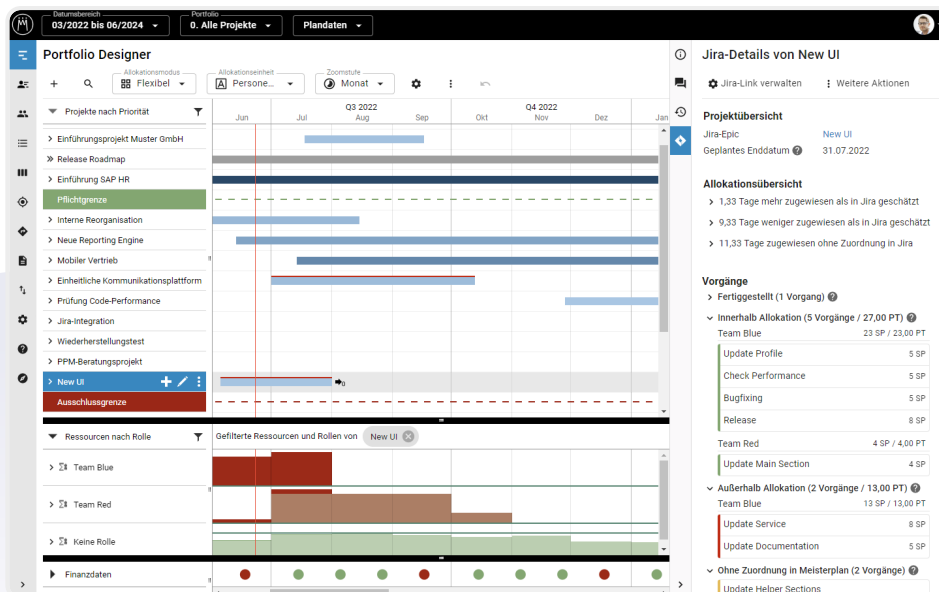
The estimates made in Meisterplan using the data in Jira are to be considered a starting point. The Jira integration, intuitive visualization and the possibility to simulate multiple scenarios facilitates the exchange between management and the Product Owner, and helps to determine the best result for everyone. Senior management's decisions can then be applied to the backlog by the Product Owner when he or she reprioritizes the backlog.

Tip

In addition to the topics you bring to the Portfolio Board, the Product Owner should also ensure management is aware of other work that your Agile teams do on a regular basis such as bug fixes, which also require capacity. The reason for this is to give a true picture of the capacity available for the more exciting work. Let the Product Owner break down the percentage of capacity the Agile teams needs for this (unfortunately unavoidable) work.

Your Result

✓ As management, you can plan for the long and medium term, across all teams and work methods.

✓ You can make decisions in the larger context and simulate different options.

✓ Linking to Jira allows you a transparent view of the Agile work that has already been implemented and will be ready soon.

✓ You create a realistic, achievable plan that also takes into account possible dependencies on non-Agile teams.

Your Agile Teams

✓ Continue working on your product as usual.

✓ Continue to work together as usual over a long period of time (selectively reinforced by experts).

✓ Make decisions independently, as the Product Owner continues to decide on the content to be implemented.

✓ Can make short-term decisions based on a larger plan due to the transparency of the portfolio and thus gain more decision-making security.

Now you have the knowledge to bridge the gap between agile teams and management and can create portfolio plans that work for everyone!

Further Reading

> Claudio Ciborra (1951-2005), a great thinker who understood information systems not primarily as a technical but as a social system. A short EXECUTIVE SUMMARY of his brilliant creativity written by Steven Verjans (2005):
> https://researchgate.net/publication/210252939_Bricolage_as_a_way_of_life_-_Improvisation_and_irony_in_information_systems

> Ralph Stacey. What kind of decision-making is appropriate for my problem? Often falsified (especially in project management publications), never achieved. Here is a condensed version of the original:
> https://www.gp-training.net/uncertainty-complexity-chaos-risk/complexity-stacey-matrix/

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