

BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

KEN SCHWABER | CO-CREATOR SCRUM IN 1995; FOUNDED SCRUM.ORG IN 2009



W. MARC BERNSAU

BY JAY FITZGERALD
Special to the Journal

From serving in the Merchant Marine delivering war supplies to U.S. troops in Vietnam to being the co-developer of one of the most important software

development guides ever written, you might say Ken Schwaber has had an interesting career.

Sure, he could regale listeners with his tales, most of which he fondly recalls as important steps along a career's journey of discovery, about serving in the Merchant Marine or working in the early years

of the computer industry at Sears Roebuck, the University of Chicago on behalf of IBM, 20th Century Fox, Honeywell, Wang Laboratories and ultimately starting his own firm, Advanced Development Methods (ADM), whose customers included Lotus Development.

But it was that software development guide, or

framework, now widely known among developers as simply “Scrum,” that has ultimately defined Schwaber and his collaborator, Jeff Sutherland, as sort of behind-the-scenes giants in the software world. And it’s because of Scrum that Schwaber, who also founded Burlington’s Scrum.org, which today teaches software developers how to use the Scrum framework, is today one of two Tech Luminaries named as the 2017 Innovation All-Stars.

So what is “Scrum”? Technically, it’s a management and control process that allows software teams to cut through the complexity of developing new software to build products for businesses as quickly, creatively and efficiently as possible.

For lay people, think of it this way: Imagine Bill Belichick, the New England Patriots football coach, sitting down and spilling the beans, in extraordinary detail, how exactly he prepares, step by step, for each NFL season, each NFL draft and free-agent signing, each NFL game and each NFL playoff showdown – and how he repeats the process, with necessary alterations, year after year. Such a guide would be a goldmine of knowledge for young coaches just starting out.

Basically, Scrum, which got its name from the game of rugby’s famous playing formation, serves as a detailed guide on how to approach software development, a process that before 1995 was often chaotic, unpredictable and terribly inefficient.

As of a result of the

KEN SCHWABER

Title: Founder of Scrum.org and Advanced Development Methods (ADM)

Age: 71

Education: Bachelor’s degree, marine engineering, U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, 1967; master’s degree, executive business, UCLA, 1978

Residence: Lexington

collaboration between Schwaber and Sutherland in the mid-1990s, Scrum brought a framework, or a process, to follow for software development projects, so much so that Scrum has developed its own language and terms used by software developers, such as “Artifact” (a physical or virtual tool used by a “scrum team” to facilitate the scrum process), a “Blocker” (anything keeping an engineer from moving forward on a task in progress) or a “Sprint” (a fixed number of days during which the team can work together to produce an agreed upon set of changes to a product).

“We just kept refining it and refining it and refining it,” said Schwaber of his work over the years with Sutherland on Scrum, first officially unveiled at the Object-Oriented Programming, Systems, Languages & Applications (OOPSLA) workshop in Texas in October 1995.

Since that official unveiling of Scrum – which Sutherland, as a software development aficionado, had initially envisioned and outlined before teaming up with Schwaber – Scrum has become ubiquitous among software developers, as Schwaber traveled the world

preaching its benefits and even its necessity.

In 2009, Schwaber founded Scrum.org, a for-profit arm of his Advanced Development Methods in Burlington, with 15 full-time employees, 170 partnerships and 40,000 users of Scrum’s materials and methodologies.

“It’s been wonderful,” said Schwaber of his years developing, refining and spreading the word of Scrum. “It’s been very satisfying.”



When you first co-developed Scrum, the software development process, did you have any idea it would become as big as it has

today? Scrum’s simplicity allowed situational innovation while the framework provided the minimal ingredients for successful software delivery. Relying on the skills of the people while keeping the results open has proven to be universally applicable to solving complex problems like software delivery. I credit Scrum’s success now and in the future to its simple framework augmented by the determination, intelligence, and hard work of the Scrum teams that employ it. Trust is the universal solvent.

Do you see Scrum still being around and vibrant in 10 years? Scrum has lasted the past 21 years with very little change, yet the majority of teams delivering software-based products today use Scrum. That shows how well Scrum can stand up to the test of time. That doesn’t mean we should rest on the past. Scrum is empirical and the way we will continue to evolve Scrum must be empirical as well through learning and adapting.

Besides co-developing Scrum, what is another of your accomplishments that you’re most proud of? Scrum’s success arises from small groups of people relying on openness, respect, determination, courage and compassion to address life’s challenges. Although applying Scrum to software was challenging, applying its ideas and values to being part of my family has provided my greatest rewards.