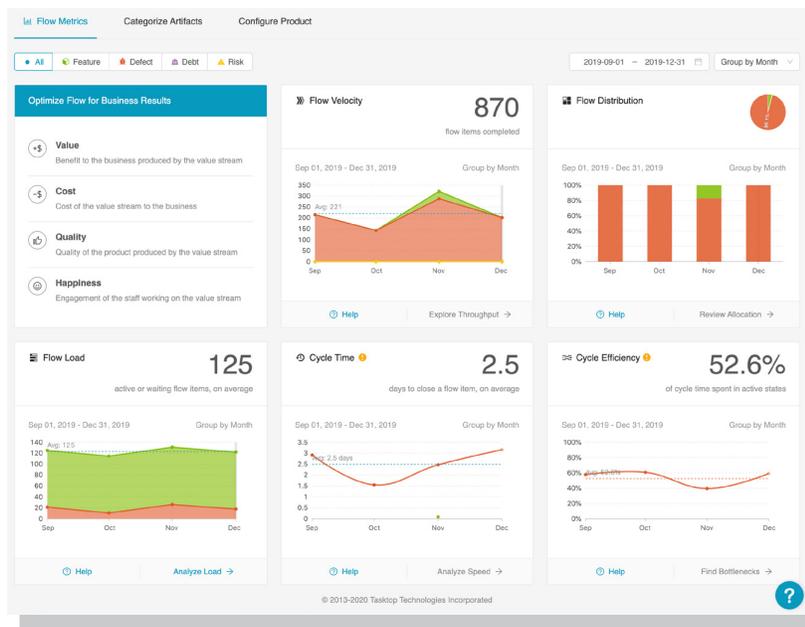# How **flow metrics** helped a wireless carrier make strategic business decisions on outsourcing

HIGHLIGHTS

- Revealed the extent of the "outsourcing black hole" –zero visibility into flow

- Prompted executive leadership to change strategy on outsourcing

- Led to changes in tool implementation to improve bottleneck

THE PROBLEM

Navigating the shift from project to product in Enterprise IT

Amid the race to deploy 5G networks and the ceaseless competition with rival networks, the amount of software being developed in the telecommunications industry is explosive.

For one wireless carrier, the need to innovate at the speed of the market demanded a shift from project to product. Yet, the challenge of transitioning such a large enterprise (with tens of thousands of insourced and outsourced IT practitioners) to a new operating model was daunting. And doing so with the wrong metrics to guide them could lead to disaster.

Executive leadership turned to the Flow Framework™ and Tasktop Viz to help navigate this critical transformation. Their goal was to apply the product lens to their existing project-oriented technical infrastructure and get instant visibility into software productivity for each product value stream.

"Tasktop has both the technology and the consulting capabilities to help us in the transformation from project to product, by doing value stream analysis of how work gets to production."
– VP, IT Development

THE SOLUTION

In September 2019, several product value streams began using Tasktop Viz, to gain visibility into their flow and identify where work was slowing down. As a first step, they pointed Tasktop Viz at Jira, their Agile planning tool.

Figure A:

Flow Distribution, Sep–Dec 2019

Insight #1 from Flow Distribution: Zero metrics, zero visibility

One product value stream relies heavily on a managed service partner, to whom they outsource their development and testing work. Features and stories are designed and prepped in Jira and then handed off to the partner, who works in a separate toolset.

The Flow Distribution metric revealed just how crippling the lack of visibility into the vendor's productivity is. Here's how:

Flow Distribution illustrates the ratio of features, defects, debt and risk delivered in a given time period. And this value stream's Flow Distribution was all red (see Figure A).

In Tasktop Viz, red is the color reserved for defect work. A healthy value stream should have a mix of colors: green for features, purple for debt, and yellow for risks.

This Flow Distribution metric makes it abundantly clear that the product value stream cannot measure the flow of feature work through their value streams at all. If they cannot measure what they're delivering and where work is slowing down, how can they possibly move faster?
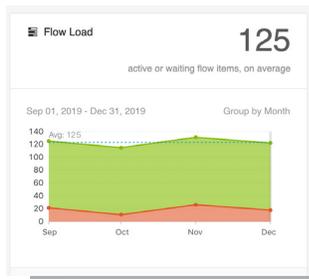

Figure B:

Flow Load, Sep–Dec 2019

Insight #2 from Flow Load: So, where are the features and stories hiding?

To work successfully with a sub-contractor, you must prep the work really well. Features and user stories have to be detailed in very clear and specific terms. The wireless carrier invested heavily in this upfront work to ensure the speed and quality of the contractor's deliverables.

When ready, the features and stories were set to an "in progress" state and handed over to the contractor. The Flow Load metric illustrates around 100 such artifacts in progress between September and December 2019 (see Figure B).

But with the contractor off working in their own tooling, stories were never closed. Processes weren't tight enough to return to these stories and manually close them out even once the code was delivered. As a result, the value stream has very little insight to feed continuous improvement efforts: Is the upfront work paying off? Are stories closing faster? Should contractors now have more capacity to be delivering more? Is quality improving?

Impact of learnings from Tasktop Viz:

- While the challenges of outsourcing work were well-known to practitioners, demonstrating the poor visibility to executive leadership using the Flow Metrics was a game changer.

- Executive leadership took concrete steps to change the outsourcing paradigm in order to gain the visibility they require. To continually improve the mechanics and techniques they use to advance work from inception to production, they are considering several options, including insourcing the work, integrating the vendor's toolchain with their own, or requiring the vendor to use their Jira.

- The Jira implementation was adjusted to help practitioners better capture the flow of work through the value stream and highlight wait states that impact velocity.

"One of the learnings is we have a black hole where contractors do work. Showed up clearly in the Tasktop Viz data. The handoff to managed service teams is a black hole. The goal is to get them using our tools so data in Viz is more reflective and we have more visibility into wait times."

– VP, IT Development