

Why Do Release Planning?

by Mike Cohn • 13 Comments

I live in Colorado, which boasts some of the world's best hiking trails and North America's greatest concentration of mountain peaks over 14,000 feet (nearly 4,300 meters). There are so many mountains over 14,000 feet high here that they are referred to simply as "fourteeners."

Most of Colorado's fourteeners are non-technical routes; no special equipment is needed and anyone in good shape can make it to the summit. This means there are a couple of different ways to climb a fourteener. One approach is to drive to the base of the mountain and start walking toward the highest thing you see. This will almost certainly be a false peak—once you're reached it, you'll see a higher point that had been obscured by the false peak. So walk again toward the highest point you see. It, too, will probably be a false peak. But, keep this up long enough and you'll eventually find the true summit.

In doing so, though, you will probably have to descend into a few valleys only to climb higher on the other sides. The approach will feel highly inefficient. A second way to climb a fourteener is to purchase a topographic map, identify a route up the mountain, and then proceed that way. Looking first at a topographic map allows you to plot a course to the summit that avoids much of the inefficiency of the first approach. Of course, we must be careful not to value our route plan too highly—a stream we plan to cross may be too deep when we get there or a rock slide may have made a trail impassable, and we'll need to alter the route when we encounter these problems.

An agile team does release planning to avoid the same type of problems we avoid with a topographic map when hiking a fourteener. A release plan helps a team avoid finishing a series of sprints and feeling that, while they always worked on the highest priority items, the collection of work completed does not add up to a satisfying whole.

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