



**AGILE CHANGE**  
*management limited*

# Understanding Agile Project Management

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## Overview

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This is the transcript of a webinar I recently delivered to explain in simple terms what agile project management is and how it differs from traditional methods including PRINCE2®. The purpose of the webinar was to help anyone who has heard 'that everyone is using agile' but doesn't really understand what this means.

The webinar addressed the following areas:

1. Why is knowing about Agile Project Management relevant to me?
2. What does agile mean?
3. What are the benefits of using an agile approach?
4. What are the key differences between agile and non-agile methods?
5. Can agile be used for all types of projects?
6. What are the pitfalls of using agile project management?
7. Who needs to be involved in adopting agile methods?

### 1. Why is knowing about Agile Project Management relevant to me?

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As part of my preparation for delivering this webinar, I reviewed lots of on-line articles and surveys about the current trends and issues in project management. I compiled a list of the most commonly cited trends, many of which either expressly stated the adoption of agile, or identified aspects of agile project management that were becoming the norm. In summary, these were the key trends:

- Tipping point: Even those organisations who haven't formally adopted agile project management are using the terminology. Recent research indicates that about a quarter of companies in the UK are applying or trialling an agile approach so we are moving towards the tipping point when agile becomes the norm and not the exception.
- CV relevance: Everyone is talking about agile but if it's not on your CV you are advertising that you are out of the loop. It's difficult to make the case that you are a project professional if you are not well informed about the biggest trend to impact our profession in a decade.
- Well informed: If you don't know how agile works how can you join the debate on how, when and where it should be applied? Despite what some enthusiasts claim, an agile approach isn't always the solution. Effective project management means tailoring our approach to fit the situation but if you don't know about agile aren't you in danger of only pushing for use of what you do know (which is probably PRINCE2®?)
- Early benefits: Customers want tangible outputs from their project investment as soon as possible. Agile planning and delivery cycles will enable you to meet this demand. It is no longer acceptable to deliver only at the end of the project lifecycle. Success means being fast on our feet and getting our products and services in front of our users as soon as possible.
- Leadership authority: Lots of project team members already have an understanding of agile and see it as the best of breed approach. If you don't understand what agile project management is and how it works you risk your authority being challenged by your own team!

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## 2. What does agile mean?

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There is no simple definition, agile means lots of different things to different people. In the broadest sense, there is a spectrum of agile environments. At one end, we have organisational agility, which is the desire by senior executives to respond quickly to customer demand and changes in the market place. It is also a reaction to the difficulties of strategic planning in fast moving environments, where organisations value their ability to be flexible and implement change more than they value the establishment of strategic objectives.

At the other end of the spectrum we have development agility which has been adopted by many in IT development roles, often using Scrum which is a well-known agile development approach. Agile development is about doing the work as quickly as possible, getting it in front of users and making changes in response to their feedback. There is no time for documenting what is being done, because things are evolving so quickly.

Sitting in the middle of these two extremes is Agile Project Management, which deploys agile development and helps to create organisational agility. Agile Project Management responds to changing requirements but still creates core project documentation to establish the viability of the project (Business Case) and clarify what will be produced (Delivery Plan).

## 3. What are the benefits of using an agile approach?

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Agile Project Management is beneficial to Project Managers and Project Teams because it gives us a set of tools and techniques for addressing some of the most common project problems that we face:

- As soon as we have agreed the project requirements, through an exhaustive process of requirements gathering workshops, interviews and meetings, more requirements are identified and users demand to include them in the project.
- The project plan is constantly being adjusted to take account of newly identified requirements, unexpected issues, resource availability problems, discovery that some work is more complicated than expected etc.
- The project deadline is being pushed out by these issues, leading to accusations by the users that the delivery date is uncertain and difficult to anticipate.
- The project team is under a lot of pressure to deliver to an unrealistic deadline, where the Sponsor is happy to agree to a wider scope but still wants to maintain the same budget and delivery date.
- The business turns around at the end of the project and says that the project deliverables do not meet their needs.

Agile Project Management addresses these problems and delivers real benefits to those within the project and those who are impacted by it. I think the most important benefits of using Agile Project Management are:

- Requirements are more current – we are only asking users to explain what they need to be able to do at the start of the project. In an agile project, our first step is to create a prototype of what we think will give them what they need, and then ask them for feedback. If we are on the right track we can add in extra ideas that they give us for more features and functions. If the users think we have the wrong solution they can let us know very early in the project lifecycle, minimising the cost of this failure and giving us a much better idea of what it is they actually want by explaining why what we have developed is wrong.
- By only planning for the next immediate activities in detail, whilst maintaining a high level schedule of key dates for the rest of the project, we do not waste time planning in detail at the start and then re-planning at the detailed level every time something changes.
- Replacing a guarantee of delivering every possible requirement with a guarantee that the project team will deliver a workable solution (even if it doesn't have all of the desired features and functions) enables the project team to offer their users a stable deadline so that they can plan changes to their ways of working and send notifications about the project to customers, suppliers and regulators.
- Agile protects the deadline, not the delivery. So the project team can address the ever increasing scope by applying prioritisation, evaluating all of the requirements and ensuring that those that deliver the greatest business value are delivered first. If the project runs out of time, it has still delivered something that is capable of realising benefits.
- The business get what they need, not what someone else wants them to have. There are activities and responsibilities to ensure that those impacted by the project are involved all the way through from initial idea to implementation, shaping the deliverables, with frequent and regular cycles of feedback.

## 4. What are the key differences between agile and non-agile methods?

There are differences in what the project delivers and there are differences in the environment in which the project is managed.

### Traditional PM

### Agile PM

Fixed

Solution

Flexible

Late

Delivery

Early

Single

Output

Multiple

Promised

Features

Prioritised

The differences in what the project delivers are:

- The solution is not pre-defined, and all of the features and functions are not known from the start. Therefore, the users will experience incremental delivery, receiving a workable product to begin with, which they can then shape with further requests for features, generated by their initial use of the project deliverables in a live environment.
- The project delivers as early as possible and then delivers frequently after that until the end of the project. This is a change from waterfall managed projects that deliver once at the end of the project. There is a need for users to be prepared for these frequent implementations and there is a pressure to realise the benefits from the early deliveries to fund the later development work.
- Prioritisation drives what work is done. Requirements are not gathered in full at the start of the project and there is no promise to deliver every requirement. There is a promise that the most important or Must Have requirements, that create the most value will be delivered. After that, any available time and resources will create the next most valuable requirements.

The differences in the project environment are:

Traditional PM		Agile PM
Project resources	Team	<i>Business + project resources</i>
Directs the team	Project Manager	<i>Team is self-reliant</i>
Command and control	Approach	<i>Collaborative</i>
Documents	Information	<i>Discussions</i>

- The involvement in the business in what is often called a 'one-team' culture. This means that those with project responsibilities work alongside those whose work will be impacted by what the project delivers. It is a partnership where the project can only be successful if the users help the project team to shape the deliverables, and the project team work to meet the evolving needs of the users.
- There is a change in the role of the Project Manager from someone who undertakes all of the detailed planning to someone who encourages the project team to think for themselves. This is the role of Project Manager as mentor and coach. It replaces an environment of 'command and

control' with an environment that encourages the team to be empowered, to take responsibility for identifying what work needs to be done and planning and delivering it without being chased by the Project Manager.

- The absence of formal project reports in favour of face to face meetings, facilitated discussions and lots of sharing of ideas and information. This means that there is less of an audit trail of who did what and when they did it. The emphasis is on making progress. Formal progress reports are replaced by demonstrations of what has been created, so users can actually see and experience the project deliverables instead of reading about them in reports.

### 5. Can agile be used for all types of project?

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Agile enthusiasts will argue that an agile approach is the best approach for all circumstances. However, I recognise that the difference in approach between an agile and a waterfall style of project management can sometimes be too much of a change. My criteria for applying agile project management are:

- Is there a genuine deadline that the project must meet? If not, we are asking our users to allow the solution to evolve over an undefined period of time. This is bad news for them and for us, because it means that we are committing to a project that might never end!
- Does the project involve creating something where the solution is not known in detail? If our project involves creating deliverables that have been created many times before, only in different circumstances, then the solution is not really evolving – it's already known. So why go through multiple iterative cycles to build on our learning and to develop better and better deliverables when we already know exactly what is required?
- This aligns to my third point, where we have to ask whether or not there is genuine uncertainty about what is needed. If there is a chance that the requirements identified today could be stale and out of date tomorrow, then an iterative approach to developing the solution will allow for new ideas to be incorporated into the project. However, if there is certainty over what is required and this is not going to change over the duration of the project then an agile approach is providing a solution when there isn't a problem.
- Finally, agile overcomes a lot of the bad press associated with document heavy approaches including PRINCE2®. If you work for an organisation where your users associate projects with 60 page Project Initiation Documents and lots of reports then they might find agile a refreshing change which cuts down the documentation in favour of getting things done.

For more information about my agile project checklist, have a look at this video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IquRQpzJDUI>

## 6. What are the pitfalls of using agile project management?

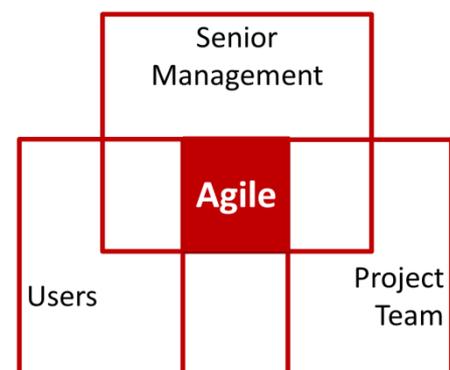
There are some practical pitfalls associated with adopting agile project management that aren't written about in the Agile Project Management handbooks but can act as real blockers to creating an agile environment.

- The first concerns how resources work together. Agile projects are more likely to succeed if the project resources are co-located because there can be genuine, face to face engagement between team members. This saves time when issues need to be resolved and encourages collaboration, ideas sharing and the identification of innovative ways to solve problems. However, over the last 10 years many organisations have invested in creating environments that support 'hot desking' and 'home working'. To turn around and say that we want to reverse this trend and co-locate project teams can be a difficult sell.
- Everyone is busy so the opportunity for users to become involved on a day to day basis to advise project team members of their needs, review models, attend walk-throughs and give feedback on the usability of what the project is delivering can be seen as a burden and not a benefit.
- Another concern is that the roll-out of agile is more successful if it is piloted on one or two projects to begin with, lessons are learnt and then it is rolled-out to a few more projects before it becomes the norm. In fact many organisations have realised that whilst agile projects have lots of benefits they are not suitable for all projects, so maintain a mixed waterfall/agile approach.
- However, the structure under-pinning project authorisation, funding and reporting still supports only waterfall projects. So the demands made by senior managers and/or the Project Management Office for project documentation suits waterfall projects but does not take into account the evolving nature of agile projects and the limited documentation created by them.

## 7. Who needs to be involved in adopting agile methods?

I think one of the most common issues I have found in helping organisations to adopt an agile approach is that the agile approach created for one organisation can be very different for another organisation.

In agile circles this is described as *'my agile is not your agile!'* Agile is a philosophy, it is not a methodology. There are agile principles which you can deploy in a way that makes sense for the culture of your organisation, the types of projects that you are managing and the business value that you need to create.



For this reason, creation of an agile approach to project management cannot be done by project professionals in isolation from the businesses that they serve. Adoption of agile is a collaborative



exercise. To build an effective agile project management team requires resources from the business to take on the roles of Business Ambassadors and Business Advisers. This requires a willingness to work day to day on the project, not full time, because these resources still have their 'business as usual' responsibilities. However, project teams cannot adopt agile without this change in user behaviour. We also need senior managers to get involved in the adoption of agile, because they have to be willing to authorise projects where the budget and timeline are fixed, but what they will actually get for their money is not fixed, and will emerge over time as requirements become clearer.

### Conclusion

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I hope you found this information useful. For more updates about Agile Project Management, connect with me on LinkedIn <http://uk.linkedin.com/in/melaniefranklin1/> or follow me on Twitter [@AgileMelanie](https://twitter.com/AgileMelanie)