The Road to Agile Project Management

This article separates agile project management from agile development, outlines the value of being project agile, describes what being project agile means at both the organisational and the project level. Finally, some thoughts on how to become an agile project manager and an agile project organisation are suggested.

It has been written in parallel with a presentation to the South Wales and West of England Branch of the APM, on 9th September, the slides for which can be found here:

http://www.apm.org.uk/news/agile-project-management-everything-you-wanted-know-were-too-afraid-ask-9th-september-2014

Some say, and I have been one of them, that there is no road to agile project management; because there is no such thing as Agile Project Management. Note the use of capitals.

Many books, articles and blogs have been written about it. And Agile Project Management is very much a current, even an in-vogue subject. Which is worrying enough, this year's fad is tomorrow's discredited idea.

Why worrying? Well, being agile (no capital) is extremely valuable. Just ask Julius Caesar. We can, by reading Roman and other historians and his own Conquest of Gaul. I would argue that his entire 7 year campaign to add Gaul to the Roman empire was done in an agile way.

He was flexible, he had and set clear goals, customer needs (trade, wealth, slaves, produce etc.) were met in iterative steps, and he created self-organising teams. More on these traits later.

His final main battle, the double encirclement of Alesia, was an agile triumph.

A pity he was less agile as a civic leader, the Ides of March and all that.

Not convinced by Julius Caesar? How about some research? The table below is from the Business value of agile software methods, by Dr F Rico, Dr H Sayani and Dr S Sone (2010).

Year	Organization	Author	# Respondents	Productivity increase	Quality increase	Cost reduction
2003	Shine	Johnson	131	93%	88%	49%
2006	Agile Journal	Barnett	400	45%	43%	23%
2007	Microsoft	Begel et al.	492	14%	32%	16%
2007	UMUC	Reco et al.	250	81%	80%	75%
2008	AmbySoft	Ambier	642	82%	72%	72%
2008	IT Agile	Wolf, et al.	207	78%	74%	72%
2008	Version One	Hanscom	3061	74%	68%	38%
			Average	67%	65%	49%

It demonstrates the improved success rates from using an agile approach. Ok that research relates to agile software development and NOT agile project management. However, PWC's 3rd Global

Survey on the state of project management stated that project success rates where an agile approach was used reached 59%, compared with 30-40% without.

It is true that PWC spoiled things a bit by stating that SCRUM was the fastest growing project management method. WRONG! It is NOT a project management method, any more than waterfall is. It is a development method. More on this later.

The PMI Pulse of the Profession (2012) similarly stated that organisations with the best success rates used agile.

And even the UK government, not known for fast moves into new ways of working, gave prominence to agile in its 2011 ICT Strategy and 2012 Digital Strategy.

For all this, use of an agile approach is not a magic bullet.

So, convinced of the value of agile? Then read on as I consider what agile……. is.

In 2001 a group of folks got together in the mountains of Colorado and developed the Agile Manifesto. This was specifically about software development and has influenced Agile development methods such as DSDM, SCRUM and many others. The manifesto is listed below.

- Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software.
- Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage.
- Deliver working software frequently, from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, with a preference to the shorter timescale.
- Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.
- Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.
- The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.
- Working software is the primary measure of progress.
- Agile processes promote sustainable development. The sponsors, developers, and users should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely.
- Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.
- Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential.
- The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.
- At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behaviour accordingly.

My take on these are the following *Agile Principles* which are readily applicable to project, programme and portfolio management.

- Satisfy the customer, produce outcomes that result in benefits
- Embrace changing requirements

- Provide an environment for success that is sustainable
- Collaborative behaviours based on Trust
- Keep it simple
- At regular intervals – reflect, learn and adjust

Which brings me to the Agile Camel with two humps. One hump is Agile development method, e.g. DSDM. The other hump is for Agile project management.

They are not the same. And yet many people confuse the two. Whereas it is quite simple, one needs to project manage say a software development project. Two approaches, both of which are needed and which need to be integrated during the project. Each method is designed to do different things.

If they were the same, or combined together in a single method, this would severely limit the method's usefulness, or cause much to be left out.

No, the point about project management methods is that they be generic. Adaptable to whatever the project is concerned with. Whether software development, building a dam or launching a new product to market.

Even Prince/2, that much maligned so-called beaurocratic PM method has been adapted for Agile development projects. QED.

I hope that is clear.

Which brings me back to non-existent Agile Project Management. For me there are two clear point to be made:

> [1] for someone to claim they have truly invented Agile Project Management, they must be able to show clear blue water between their method and existing generic PM methods. So far I have not seen anything that looks more than an adaptation – sometimes inciteful and very useful – but just an adaptation of other PM methods. I will be generous and say that many are useful extentions.

> [2] why do we need an Agile Project Management method? Surely, professional project managers are by their very nature and behaviour, agile?

So one road to agile project management is not to develop a supposed new method, but to *develop better PM professionals*.

That is all well and good for individuals; what about agile organisations? First of all many claim that *agile cannot work in my organisation*. And often with justification citing reasons such as:

- Agile is only for software engineering
- Agile doesn't scale to large projects/programmes
- Agile isn't or doesn't use project management
- Agile doesn't have any requirements
- Agile doesn't have any documentation

- Agile isn't disciplined or measurable
- Agile is chaotic.

What they are really saying is that their organisation's culture(s) currently are not supportive of an agile approach.

I say so what? Many organisation's culture(s) are not friendly to projects. At worst, projects are seen as a virus on the Business As Usual body, and like an organism, the organisation reacts to ensure the project cannot survive. Let alone thrive. See my blogs:

http://www.apm.org.uk/blog/hyenas-long-grass-your-organisation-programme-friendly

http://www.apm.org.uk/blog/banishing-hyenas-building-programme-friendly-organisation-culture.

And what do I mean by organisation culture? A much abused term. If you ask someone how their organisation works, they will usually cite strategy, values, policies, procedures, organisation structure and so on. But this is like the visible part of an iceberg. Out of site under the surface there are many other factors at work: how we do things here, relationships, e.g. getting things done through contacts, unwritten rules, assumptions, common practice, and so on.

Both above and below the surface factors combine to produce how people in an organisation behave. And that is the organisation's culture, and a *non-agile organisation culture* might look like this:

- Lack of flexibility
- Non-release of operational resources
- Lengthy decision making, e.g. change
- Resistance to Matrix working
- Top down governance
- Lack of Trust and empowerment
- Very risk averse – loathing of uncertainty.

If you can analyse the culture, you can determine how to change it, to for example, an agile culture.

And what does an agile culture – *an agile landscape* – look like?

- Trusted organisation
- Adaptive operating model – i.e. not too centralised
- Devolved governance
- P3 embedded in business operations
- Continuous learning is embedded
- Self-organising teams and people
- Collaborative culture
- Leadership tolerant of ambiguity.

I can suggest a couple of amusing videos on YouTube that illustrate the challenges of working in a non-agile culture. Again this is about an Agile software project, as will become very, and repetitiously obvious. But the challenges are valid for agile working.

I want to run an agile project parts 1 and 2:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4u5N00ApR_k

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAf3q13uUpE

The road to agile project management can be rocky, and perhaps filled with the wreckage of failed agile projects. Common reasons for such wreckage include;

a) A misunderstanding about what being agile means. It is not an excuse for leaving stuff out. If anything, working in an agile way means a more structured approach.
b) Assuming an agile approach is the silver bullet. Like any other approach, using it in the wrong circumstances can be fatal.
c) If being agile is a mindset, not achieving and living that mindset means you will not be agile. For example, failing to commit operational resources to enable collaboration, or a failure to delegate authority.
d) Self-organisation can be scary, leading to managers escalating many decisions they should be taking. Causing delays and a lack of trust.
e) Incremental working means a project manager has to keep the eye on the ball, to ensure that embraced change does send the project off at multiple tangents. Diluting or even destroying the planned value.

Creating an agile project organisation also means that projects need to look agile too. Characteristics of *an agile project culture* could include:

- An agile friendly landscape
- An adaptive and flexible project manager
- Collaborative working
- High level requirements – you have to be able to start somewhere
- Prioritised requirements
- Lean decision making, e.g. for Changes
- Maintaining focus on the business objectives
- Document…..just enough
- Constantly planning
- Constantly learning
- Constantly watching the sky ahead, i.e. managing risk.

So far I have sketched out what the end of the journey to agile project management might look like, and pitfalls to avoid. The journey itself is surely a Change programme and another paper or 10 could be written about that. I will, however, offer some guidance.

Firstly, such culture change MUST be driven from the top, and value is the language of the "C" level. A CEO must "get" the point of being agile, for them and for their organisation.

Secondly, establish leadership that will sustain the Change. You will be trying to change culture so remember the iceberg.

Which brings me to the third piece of advice; your approach should comprise and integrate People, Process and Tools. Being Agile is after all a mindset as well as process. And tools can help as well.

And a final plug. If you want some guidance on how to succeed at Change I recommend my Tactics for Change:

1. Lead through inspiration, care and Trust
2. Open Minds, Make the Change, Embed the Change
3. Work with your environment
4. Understand what can stop you being successful
5. Know and communicate the purpose of the Change
6. Recombine and re-use
7. Prepare for delivery AND for operations.
8. Be flexible and adapt, e.g. plan, measure and adjust
9. Ensure people know what they are to do, where they fit and how they *can* work
10. Build a confident and professional team.

For more on these see the following:

http://www.apm.org.uk/news/transformational-change-what-do-and-yellow-brick-road

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Adrian has always specialised in and championed the people aspects of our profession, notably stakeholder management. In recent years much of his practice has focussed on developing organisation cultures friendly to programmes and projects. He is also a visiting lecturer at two business schools and sponsorship coach at another.

He has been a long time contributor within the profession, notably within the APM, where he is currently a member of their Audit Committee. He is a frequent speaker, in the UK and internationally, has been a contributor to most of the UK project, programme and portfolio management standards, is co-author of the Gower Handbook of Programme Management, and a right little blogger.