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The Changing Landscape of Agile Delivery

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Content

Foreword

As I reflect on my time in software project delivery management, I've come to realise that the adoption of Agile methodologies has introduced new challenges in the business world. While concepts like Scrum and Extreme Programming (XP) were emerging in the early 2000s, I was initially focused on the technical aspects of project delivery. It wasn't until later, as the Agile Manifesto started gaining traction, that I began to appreciate how these ideas affected team dynamics.

In my experience, many organisations have mistakenly adopted Agile frameworks without considering their unique context or business needs. This has led to frustration and disillusionment among teams, who feel constrained by process requirements rather than empowered by them. The emphasis on iterative development, continuous improvement, and individual freedom can sometimes collide with the demands of business stakeholders for predictability, control, and accountability.

As I've encountered engineers in my teams who resist the need for process constraints, estimates, and commitments, I realise that this friction is not just a personal issue – it's a systemic problem. The industry's enthusiasm for Agile has created a culture where some teams feel forced to adapt to rigid frameworks rather than cultivating a flexible approach that suits their specific needs.

In reality, many businesses struggle to reconcile the ideals of Agile with the harsh realities of delivering projects on time and within budget. This tension is exacerbated by the tendency to impose process templates wholesale, without considering the nuances of each organisation or project. The result can be teams that are burned out from the perception that process is being imposed upon them, rather than working in harmony.

As someone who has championed progressive thinking in software delivery through books like "Team Topologies" and "The Phoenix Project," I've come to see that there's a need for more balanced approaches. Rather than imposing rigid frameworks, we should focus on creating environments where teams can thrive within the unique context of their organisation. By acknowledging the diversity of business needs and team cultures, we can foster an Agile mindset that is both flexible and effective.

For our 'The Changing Landscape of Agile Delivery' report, we reached out to our expert network to get a better understanding of how the Agile landscape has evolved over the years, how its accompanying challenges have changed, and what we can expect next.

Agile isn't going anywhere, instead, the challenge ahead will be around how we can reconcile the ideals of Agile with the pragmatic demands of businesses to create a more harmonious relationship between teams and stakeholders, and that is where tech consultancies like WeShape can come in and add value, to provide the right level of expertise regardless of where you are on your journey.

Luke

Luke Ashe-Browne
Director of Tech Consulting,
WeShape

Agile at a Glance

Agile today

It's been well over two decades since Agile's inception and the perception of it has undoubtedly changed. What was initially introduced as a Software Engineering methodology has developed its ability to latch onto other things as we see Agile adoption in various sizes across different areas of the business.

The need for Agile

Back in the day before Agile came about, Software Engineering primarily adopted the waterfall approach, with a fully defined scope and delivery timeline. Engineering and Product teams were often operating in siloes with varied priorities, where Engineering handed over the product once it was finished and only came in to fix any issues. There were many problems with this way of working, as it relied heavily on the accuracy of the initial scope, lacked flexibility and often left testing towards later stages in the process, leading to impatient and disgruntled customers who wanted more in less.

A new and refined way of working was needed to encourage collaboration, account for issues, cater to change requests and keep customers happy.

In hopes of that, a group of software development thought leaders, self-identified as 'The Agile Alliance', came together to find an alternative to the documentation-driven, heavyweight software development processes. As a result, the Manifesto for Agile Software Development was born, comprising 12 principles of Agile Software aimed to address those exact challenges.

The Agile Manifesto[1]

Individuals and interactions > processes and tools
Working software > comprehensive documentation
Customer collaboration > contract negotiation
Responding to change > following a plan

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[1] "Principles behind the Agile Manifesto." n.d. https://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html.

Undercurrent of Opposition

As Agile continued to evolve and transform over the years, the anti-Agile rhetoric also grew alongside it, with plenty pinning it as the root cause of project delays and failures or even going to lengths to proclaim that Agile is dead.

While it might not be dead, recent reports show a general decline in the satisfaction level with Agile practices (with a drop from 72% to 59%)[2], which warrants a closer inspection of this growing sentiment of frustration. With its conception aiming to counteract the rigid way of working, is Agile really tackling the right challenges and pointing the way to the promised land?

Here are some of the biggest concerns we've been seeing among the waves of opposition.

< Doesn't employing frameworks go against Agile principles? />

>> Agile emphasises working software and flexibility over structure or documentation, yet the **different frameworks also come with their own set of structures** like daily stand-ups, sprints, etc., which seems to be the one thing it's advocating against. Not only is it enforcing more structure (simply different from the old structure), but the regular meetings can also be **taking away valuable time** that can be spent on building instead.

< How do we know it is actually working? />

>> While Agile takes into account things like **unexpected obstacles and shifting priorities** throughout the journey, these changes can affect delivery, in turn making it hard to quantify success in the traditional sense. Agile's iterative approach is also accompanied by challenges of tracking progress, especially when there are no tangible results to show to the wider team or external stakeholders. What's stopping people from **hiding behind 'Agile' as a reason for missed delivery times and delays**?

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[2] "The 17th State of Agile Report." 2024. Digital.ai.

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‹ Where is the money? /›

›› Being able to generate revenue is arguably one of the most important ways to demonstrate value in a business. With Tech teams **already seen as a cost centre rather than revenue generator**, putting together a case to implement Agile and hire additional headcounts can be challenging. On top of that, Agile also comes with **budget concerns**, as being flexible and adaptive means things can change anytime and who's to say the final cost won't exceed the initial forecast?

‹ Why is a non-technical person coming in to enforce change? /›

›› Most Agile-related roles like Agile Coaches and Scrum Masters aren't technical, and the same goes for Product headcounts such as Product Managers. These positions often don't require any technical knowledge, and most definitely not as in-depth domain expertise as your team of engineers. While having a non-technical lead come in to guide the team can provide impartiality, the **lack of domain expertise can easily generate pushback** from the team, especially when they start enforcing change right after being airdropped in.

This could also create **tension between the Product and Engineering teams**, especially when Product Managers come in and design solutions to be created rather than identifying the problems and collaborating with the technical teams to tackle them, as the role is usually intended to be.

We live in an increasingly uncertain world – this makes long-term planning difficult, for that reason an Agile approach to delivering software will always be prevalent as by nature with shorter feedback loops it is able to organise teams and delivery that can course correct and respond. That is not to say it's a silver bullet, and will solve all software delivery problems – but it's one of the tools that can definitely help any organisation if used appropriately and adapted to the organisation's needs.

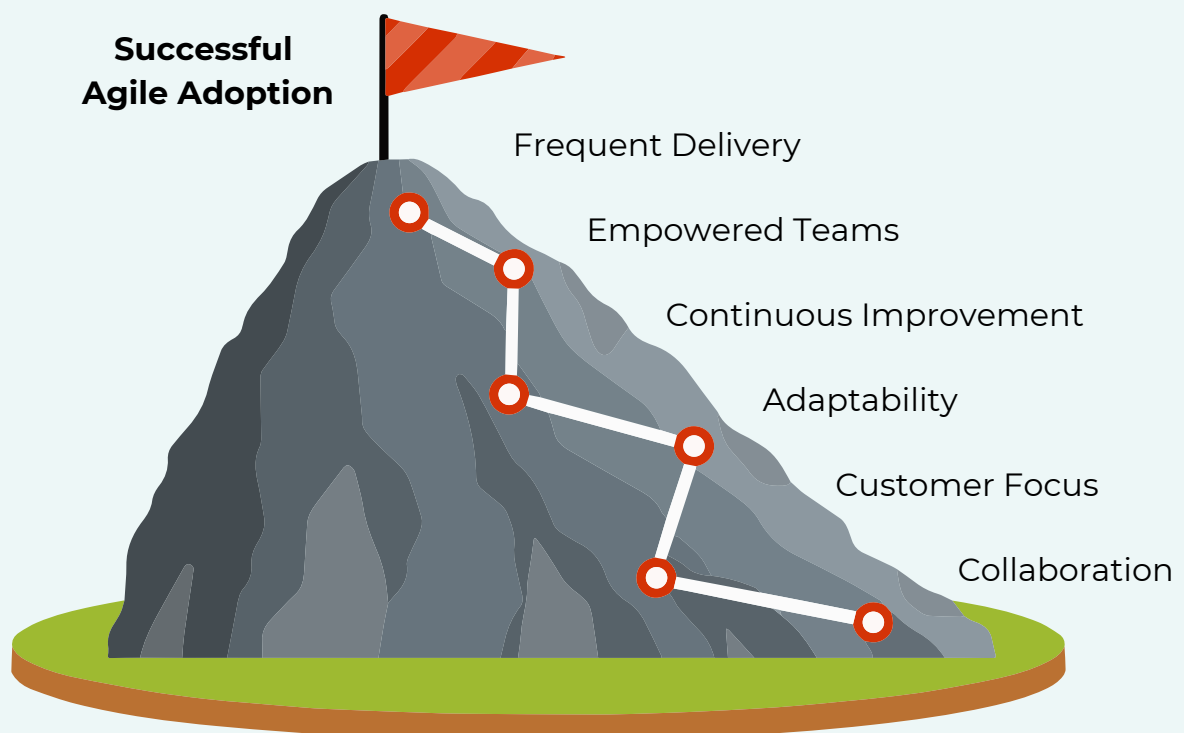**Stacey Hudson**
Head of Engineering

What Went Wrong?

While failed Agile implementations likely seeded the anti-Agile sentiment, instead of just pointing the finger at 'Bad Agile' (bad implementations that go against what Agile stands for, can be caused by numerous reasons) and continuing to sing its praises, let's take a deeper dive to look at where the issues lie.

Does Agile Work?

On paper, Agile solves many of waterfall's problems and allows a much higher flexibility to address customer concerns and ensure the end product is suited to their needs. According to a McKinsey survey, Agile can provide many benefits, including a 30 percent increase in customer satisfaction and operational decision-making[3]. Agile's potential to deliver a positive impact is undeniable, which is why it remains a topic of discussion decades after its introduction; the real challenge, however, is getting from 'adopting Agile' to 'successfully adopting Agile'.

Successful Agile Adoption

Frequent Delivery

Empowered Teams

Continuous Improvement

Adaptability

Customer Focus

Collaboration

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[3] Chong, Elena, Christopher Handscomb, Tomasz Maj, and Rishi Markenday. 2022. "In Pursuit of Value & Not Work." McKinsey & Company. October 24, 2022. https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/in-pursuit-of-value-not-work.

Where are the Gaps?

Drawing from our expertise, conversations with industry experts and observations of the market, here are a few main reasons why things could've fallen through the cracks when it comes to Agile adoption.

Jumping on the bandwagon

As with most things in tech, jumping the hottest trends and getting a piece of the buzzword pie can be quite tempting. After all, no one wants that bitter taste of being left out. Yet, adoption for adoption's sake will likely bring more harm than good.

Akin to what we discussed in our previous Data report, most areas of tech aren't a one-size-fits-all solution, so bringing on methodologies without first investigating whether they fit your team or organisation can easily end up as a round-hole square-peg situation, where you end up wasting valuable time and resources on something that you don't actually need.

Bridging the gap

A market buzz should never be the reason to immediately jump on a trend, simply because it works for someone else doesn't mean it will for you. Do your research to see if it's the right match, that means knowing where you want to go, identifying pain points and seeing if Agile can help you on that journey.

Seek expertise from Agile professionals or technology consultancies to help you with the process, whether it's for advisory or to ensure a proper implementation. If you are indeed going ahead with Agile, set a budget and put together a strategic plan with relevant metrics to track progress and keep yourself accountable.

At the end of the day, it's okay to go 'Agile isn't for me' because it's not a universal solution. Taking the time to reach that conclusion can save you countless hours down the road.

Agile has become pervasive to the point it is used in almost all technology delivery companies. It's as if people have drunk the Agile Kool-Aid and not stopped to think if it will work for them - everybody else is doing it so it must be good! The companies that drove Agile are the ones that needed it most and they are doing it with quiet success. Whilst everyone should look to see if Agile could give them benefits in their organisation, they should not start with the premise that it will.

David Crawford
NED &
Fractional CTO

Misunderstanding of Agile principles

Flying the Agile banner without truly understanding what it embodies can easily lead to 'Bad Agile'. This can take various forms, including:

Rigid enforcement: There are plenty of Agile frameworks available with their own structure and ceremonies like Scrum's daily stand-ups and Kanban's visual board. However, these are best-practice guidelines aimed to assist with Agile implementation and not prescriptive blueprints that one simply plug and play. Forcing structure onto a team because the guide says so will not only put people off but can often be counterproductive when what's being enforced doesn't align with the nature or goal of the project.

Lack of processes, tools, documentation and planning: While Agile prioritises things like individuals, collaboration and working software over processes, tools and documentation, it's by no means a call to ditch them completely. Taking an extreme approach and disregarding them goes against Agile principles and will likely lead to project failure.

Bridging the gap

Put in the effort to really understand what Agile is about. Don't just read the manifesto or blindly follow what others are doing, but invest the necessary time and resources. Whether it's engaging with technology consultancies and Agile practitioners for domain expertise or sending everyone to attend Agile courses, ensuring a comprehensive view of what Agile stands for will help lay the foundations for successful implementation.

Inconsistent implementation

While it's important to take into account the situation of the team/squad and the work that comes to them when considering Agile, simply looking inward and applying it in a bubble can result in a disjointed effort. If Agile is not implemented on an organisational level or lacks buy-in from the top, it could drive a wedge between leadership and management and create a divide across the different layers of the business. While those on the ground might be benefiting from the speed and flexibility, it wouldn't work if managers were solely focused on when they could get things delivered.

Bridging the gap

Agile works best when it's brought into the framework by the whole company with buy-in from the top, however, it's not about forcing every team to adopt Agile or doing it the same way, but instead finding what works best for each and having that mutual understanding to mitigate possible misalignments. Eliminating the 'them vs us' mentality will help remove a common obstacle and ensuring cross-functional collaboration can prove to be key in Agile implementation.

Cultural mismatch

The cultural side of Agile is arguably one of the most integral parts and one that's often overlooked. If the organisation and teams are used to a waterfall structure and way of working, believing that you can simply flip the Agile switch would be wishful thinking, as the two won't be compatible. Agile isn't the pixie dust you can just sprinkle one day and hope for magic to happen, it requires the right culture and mindset, which is why a lot of organisations struggle with Agile transformations even when there's a top-down demand for it.

Bridging the gap

Know where your organisation stands in terms of culture to see if it's ready for Agile implementation. Not having the right mindset in your teams doesn't mean you should discard Agile completely but instead look at a cultural shift before you bring Agile onboard to not risk efforts going to waste. In order to benefit from Agile, one must have an appetite for failure, so they can fail fast and succeed fast; traits like flexibility and resilience are vital here.

Lack of suitable metrics

Finding suitable metrics to demonstrate success has been a challenge within Software Engineering, one that magnifies when put in the context of Agile. Whether it's promotion criteria or performance metrics, finding a way to objectively measure engineers' efforts is never easy. In fact, depending on the evaluation method, individual metrics might not even apply to the projects they're put on, which can be quite demoralising. On the other hand, adopting trackers like 'lines of codes written', 'documentations created', etc. can also beat the purpose when it prompts people to create pointless edits and documents just to cheat the system.

Bridging the gap

Agile implementation requires a shift from the individual-centric mindset to a team-collaboration-based one, which means metrics will also need to focus on how well a team is performing instead of tracking particular contributions from an individual. That way, things like promotion targets and performance metrics are less reliant on the nature of the project and can help foster better collaboration among the team. Similarly, it's also important to look at business metrics to ensure there is value generated (not just in the sense of revenue) so that the 'why' can be justified.

Being able to keep the team motivated is critical. Particularly with experienced team members who can contribute that experience, encourage them to go beyond their usual skillsets and boundaries to come back with more ideas even if it might hurt delivery. That enables them to feel the ownership, stay engaged and motivated.

Mert Aslaner
Head of Product

What's Next for Agile

Since its inception, Agile has evolved from its initial 'challenge brand' status to reach its current level of maturity. Gone are the days when the Agile manifesto was studied like a sacred text, instead it's more about taking a holistic approach that embodies its principles.
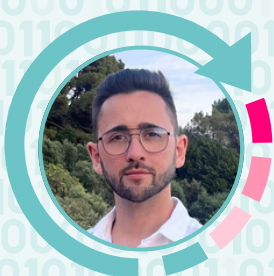
And here are some key themes for Agile we can expect to see moving forward.

< A psychological shift />

>> The process toolbelt of Scrum, Kanban, SAFe, etc. is here to stay but the psychological side of Agile will likely take prominence.

Back in the day when Agile was the new shiny object, even Agile professionals in their early careers would find people leaning on them and having the ability to help shape the field. Now that the novelty has faded and there's a general understanding of what Agile is and stands for, it's no longer about going into an organisation and doing the thing. There's an increasing focus on the psychological side of Agile, with the ability to empower teams, encourage collaboration and know when to intervene, if at all.

As Agile has now evolved to become a globally embraced way of working within organisations, the role of Agile practitioners has also evolved, aligning closely with modern leadership skills. This includes adapting quickly to and driving change, emphasising effective influence and fostering collaboration. Practitioners now play a big role in bridging all areas of an organisation, ensuring everyone is aligned with and able to contribute towards business goals. This supports the creation of motivated cross functional teams, driving a culture of shared ownership and accountability.

Marcello Franchi
Senior Agile Delivery Manager

‹ An emphasis on value /›

›› The age-old outputs vs outcomes debate - tangible results like product delivery can be easily measured and reported on, but just being able to deliver something on time doesn't necessarily mean it brings about the amount of value you'd expect with the level of input you've given. In fact, you can have on-time deliveries that don't end up adding any value at all. Obviously, an Agile way of working can minimise the chance of this from happening, as continuous communication and smaller testable iterations help ensure the end product addresses the needs of the customer without risking the Engineering team wasting precious time working on something that no longer fits the bill.

James Rooney
Founder & Delivery Manager

As Agile continues to evolve, there's also a shift for delivery to focus on their value-add. As seen in the market, there's a migration from 'Delivery' to 'Value Delivery' roles on both the client's and candidate's sides. To further strengthen value-delivery, we can expect closer collaborations between Product and Delivery teams, or even a combination of the two down the road to ensure the currently separated functions are working hand-in-hand to provide maximum value.

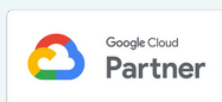# Looking for Agile advice or expertise?

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As an award-winning, leading technology delivery partner, WeShape is best positioned to assist with your technology strategies and help you achieve your goals.

Whether you need advice on potential Agile adoption or require domain expertise to ensure successful implementation, our complimentary whiteboarding session will help you identify key priorities and better understand how you can get to where you want to be.

On top of being vendor-neutral and tech-agnostic, we also have an extensive expert network and strategic relationships with GCP, AWS and RedHat, which enables us to provide bespoke solutions across Software Engineering, DevOps, Data and Cloud.

We are a purpose & vision-led business and are pleased to continue our status as a B-Corp organisation.

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A DIAMOND IS FOREVER

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