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**Agile project management
5 lessons for the unwary**

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1   Introduction

Over the last year or two we have reviewed a number of programmes and projects that are using an "agile" approach. There are a number of common problems that have come to light that should be of interest to any organisation setting out on an agile endeavour for the first time.

Agile, Lean or project management are not cures for unproductive or incompetent teams, weak leadership or poor performance management. All methods have their place and can add value and improve performance, but none on their own are a panacea as they all depend on the capability of the people involved.

This article sets out some of the key lessons that we have taken from our reviews.

2   The A word – be careful what you wish for

The word "agile" is used to describe very different things.

In some scenarios, it was an adjective to describe an aspirational future state for the culture and operation of the organisation, including greater interworking to break down silos whilst challenging cultural roots and behaviours.

> **Knowledge nugget**
> vocabulary is critical. Make sure people use the word "agile" as a meaning that everyone shares. It is either a noun or an adjective, it cannot be both.

In other scenarios, the term "Agile" was also being used as a noun, to describe a set of team behaviours and processes defined in the specific methodology.

The big problems occurred when it was being used interchangeably, so the very important different meanings were not being recognised. Consequently, when the word "agile" was used, it meant different things to different groups, to one group is meant very flexible working, to another it meant working to quite a prescriptive methodology called Agile.

3   Is Agile actually project management

Agile project management is unique because it is the only project management method that focuses on what is happening inside the team, their behaviours, values and self-management.

This compares to other methods such as PRINCE2®, which focus on organisation governance and control. So, a project actually needs a blend of both methods, it isn't either Agile or PRINCE2. It is worth remembering that "PRINCE" stands for "PRojects IN a Controlled Environment", so by definition it is setting a framework within which Agile can operate.

Despite the rhetoric, the Agile Method requires high levels of team discipline that drives collaboration and performance. Unfortunately, adopting Agile doesn't make incompetent people competent or change their personality, just like PRINCE2 doesn't turn incompetent people into projects managers.

There is often reference to "waterfall" project management within an Agile environment. It is worth bearing in mind that when Agile people refer to "waterfall" they mean rubbish project management with the inference being that Agile is automatically good and any other forms of waterfall (non-Agile) project management is automatically bad. Beware of challenging this thinking, as it will be seen as heresy to the Agile advocates.

> **Knowledge nugget**
> **Remember that Agile is a team based methodology, not a replacement for project management.**

Agile working does not come cheaply, be wary of the amount of user time that is expected in Agile. The dynamic relationship between development and user is fantastic, but it means that the user needs to be available regularly and quickly to answer questions and give opinions as there is very little documentation.

4   Maintaining control

The attraction of Agile is the somewhat anarchic and freewheeling approach matched to the cool vocabulary. As with most methods, if you strip them back there is very little in it that well organised teams don't do every day, what it helps to do is focus on collaborative behaviours and openness about progress and achievements.

It is important to be aware that Agile does not actually have a project plan, it is made up of a series of sprints that will hopefully produce something useful, which is referred to as the Minimum Value Product (MVP). Once that has been achieved it can be enhanced if there is budget left to do so. Where it goes wrong is when the budget runs out and the MVP isn't achieved, and this isn't unusual despite the marketing.

> **Knowledge nugget**
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> **Use the PRINCE2 project board model to overlay the Agile team behaviours. This maintains business ownership without constraining the opportunities created by Agile team behaviours**

The Agile method does not have the single point of accountability that is common in the project world, normally referred to as a sponsor or project executive. Consequently, if you are in a programme environment standard Agile offers no form of governance interface to the project as the method assumes it is working in isolation.

This is where the PRINCE2 governance model can be practically applied to get the best from Agile without losing control. The business ownership of the projects has to be appointed, they sit as the Project Executive with a business case, exactly as PRINCE2 describes, the Scrum Master is responsible for delivering the capability, so takes on the role of Senior Supplier and the Product Owner, responsible for delivering the business outcomes, takes on the role of Senior User. With some flexibility, this model resolves the governance issue. The project manager then focuses on the environment outside of delivery to help create the environment for success.

The issues that remain are that the Project Executive is accountable for the outcomes, but the lack of formality around the overall MVP as it evolves during each sprint, means that in effect they are accountable for something that isn't fully known and their performance cannot be measured against a plan. A tough place to find yourself if you are accountable for a business case and expected to be in control

However, it can be argued that in many projects they are already accountable for outcomes based on inadequate requirements and an unreliable plan, so what is different.

5   The language of Agile

This is a big issue and one that should not be underestimated.

Firstly, do not assume that people are interpreting Agile terminology in the same way, there are different flavours used by suppliers that can really confuse the inexperienced. There are many ways in which minor interpretations differ which lead to people leaving a meeting with completely differently interpretations of what happened in the room.

Secondly, the almost opposing terminology between normal project management and the Agile method can be very challenging as words are being used to cover similar concepts. Examples include: project stage and agile sprints are basically the same concept; MVP and product descriptions/minimum requirements serve a similar purpose.

A glossary is the best approach. Words and terms need intelligent interpretation and application. It is easy to overcome as long you don't become bogged down by the terminology.

> **Knowledge nugget**
>
> **Speaking Agile is like speaking a foreign language, there are fluent speakers, native speakers and basic speakers and don't forget, like any language, there are different dialects.**

This is a big problem for new users of Agile, it is rather like trying to speak a foreign language when you only have a few words of vocabulary, try speaking in plain English and using the words that make the most sense to you.

6   Agile in a programme environment.

Managing Successful Programmes (MSP®) has taken an agile approach since the outset in 1999. The Tranche concept is very similar to a sprint, just bigger. The MSP Tranche principle is spending the money, deliver as much as you can, and think about what this means to the next Tranche.

The concept of an Agile programme is by definition, ludicrous, because it means you would have no idea what the end goal is or how you would get there, other than spending lots of money and hoping it all works out well. MSP provides the perfect framework within which Agile can be used to the full, as it provides the environment for it to operate; however, it does need project management disciplines to enable oversight and control – both alien Agile advocates.

As MSP sees projects and black boxes, that it provides inputs and expects outputs and leaves the rest to the project manager, that it is entirely compatible with Agile as the team method within the project. The programme needs to know when it will get the outputs, and that they meet the needs of the blueprint, which provides the MVP and in the time frame to achieve the business benefits.

The big challenge for the programme environment is aggregating information that is being generated in very different ways, as such some rules will need to be established and how the interfaces will work. For example, if some projects are using Agile and others are not, then the programme will need to ensure that the programme dependencies on the Agile project are translated and managed through sprints and MVPs

This article has been written by Aspire Europe Ltd, Rod Sowden, Managing Director of Aspire Europe Ltd and Lead Author for MSP® and P3M3® and author of a number of other books on how to deploy programme management effectively.

Aspire Europe specialise in supporting organisations deliver their performance improvement strategies.

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