

# : *Why is agile important?*

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Agile hype continues to grow and some see agile as a solution to every problem (cf., Ambroziewicz, 2017; Mandir, 2018). Agile started as an approach to software development, an alternative to the software development life cycle (SDLC) framework, and it has become much more. Agile is not a magic bullet to solve every problem, rather agile is a mindset, a way of thinking, a framework for action taking, a goal, and a journey to more contingent processes, higher performance, and potential value creation. There are multiple agile methods, e.g., Scrum, Kanban, and XP, that serve different purposes. Agile means rapid response to change and creating more dynamic business processes. Agile processes are especially helpful in managing the changing requirements of projects.

The Manifesto for Agile Software Development (Beck, et al, 2001) does not discard the structures and processes of prior methods, rather Agile is an enhancer, a way to do some tasks better and faster. An agile process isn't appropriate for every task. For example, strategic decision making about irreversible alternatives should not be agile, rather the decision process should be systematic, slow and deliberate, and based upon merit, metrics, objective judgement, and awareness of possible consequences, cf., Ambroziewicz, 2017; Bezos, 2017. In many cases, however, the processes for reversible decisions should be more agile, higher velocity, and even opportunistic.

According to Rigby, Sutherland, and Takeuchi (2016), "Now agile methodologies — which involve new values, principles, practices, and benefits and are a radical alternative to command-and-control-style management — are spreading across a broad range of industries and functions and even into the C-suite." Despite the heightened interest many people misunderstand or fail to understand becoming agile and applying agile methods and principles. In general, agile is about better communication, adapting to changing situations quickly, and innovation. Agile methods are specifically good at engaging and communicating with customers and clients and often result in greater involvement of stakeholders in activities and projects.

One way to explain Agile is with a "dance" metaphor. Dance is art. Traditional organization processes are often a slow bureaucratic dance, like a classic waltz. A waltz may be an important skill to have, but most of us wouldn't want to do that dance all of the time. Individuals, teams, and organizations should perform and practice a wide variety of dances in appropriate contexts. For example, Agile scrum is perhaps like a fast tango for small projects. The point is we need to learn many dance steps and styles including tap dancing, the twist, and hip-hop if we want to be agile. A simple version of slow dancing, the two-step waltz, is often taught to elementary school students because it is much easier to learn than hip-hop, the polka, and other more energetic dance styles. Many people never go much beyond the two-step. Agile processes have various rhythms, rituals, and styles. Some say agile is ceremonial, truly intricate, complex, independent, and graceful.

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Businesses need to be more agile, especially in executing digital transformation strategies. Teams need to be more agile, especially in software and systems development. People need to be more agile in adapting and responding to change, especially in terms of information technology. Agile means "able to move quickly and easily" or "ability to think and understand quickly". Synonyms include nimble, lithe, spry, supple, limber, dexterous, deft, and graceful. Agile development is a "time-boxed, iterative approach to software delivery that builds software incrementally from the start of the project, instead of trying to deliver it all at once near the end", cf., [agilenutshell.com](http://agilenutshell.com). The noun agility is sometimes used as a similar term in strategy, new product, and marketing discussions. Sambamurthy et al. (2003) define agility as a firm's "ability to detect opportunities for innovation and seize those competitive market opportunities by assembling requisite assets, knowledge, and relationships with speed and surprise" (p. 245). Managers often strive to increase agility or to become more agile. One must ask if becoming agile and increasing agility is really important or just another buzzword or fad of the year or decade for improving performance. Becoming more agile and increasing agility are important goals for most individuals, teams, and organizations; it is not a passing fad.

Business agility refers to an enterprise's ability to respond to the ongoing technology and social disruption by using processes that better meet market and customer demands. The goal of agile and agility must be to create value. McKinsey asserts "Becoming an agile organization allows a company to increase speed of execution". Agile has become much more than a set of management practices relevant to software development.

In a CIO opinion article, Ronan (2016), a retired IT Executive at Fidelity Investments, identified 10 reasons based upon his experiences of why organizations should be using agile. Some major reasons based on the article include: 1) Decisions are made quickly, 2) Change is recognized as inevitable and is embraced, 3) Younger employees really like the collaborative, fast-paced agile environment, 4) Customer satisfaction is much higher for agile projects versus waterfall projects, and 5) Agile projects had significantly fewer defects in the production environment. These anecdotal reasons may have limited validity across organizations, but they provide arguments to test.

An Accenture study (2017) found that 80% of managers surveyed in Nordic countries "say that agility is a priority today. But more than nine out of ten (94 percent) say it will be crucial for their survival in three years." Walker (2015) asserts "Agility affects every aspect of your business, from strategy to operations, marketing, finance, and the overall organization. A recent study by Accenture Strategy found that business leaders stand apart from laggards on nearly every aspect of business agility." Accenture research identified five common traits that can help a business become more agile: 1) 'Mix-and-match' your leadership team, 2) Prioritize strategic decisions, 3) Make quick decisions, 4) Use analytics to your advantage, and 5) Realize you are not in a silo.

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An agile pioneer, Alistair Cockburn, notes in a recent Cutter Business Technology Journal article that "The Agile organization runs on decentralized decision making and is socially flat, team-oriented, and largely consensus-based. Some cultures and organizations are fundamentally hierarchical, individual- and status-oriented. These groups will have trouble incorporating Agile methods for years to come and may never get there." We may be in what Cockburn calls a "post-Agile" age, **BUT** agile remains important and somewhat mysterious.

For what types of projects should we use an Agile process? When is a structured development life cycle approach more appropriate? Agile approaches and processes are most appropriate for small and medium-size projects where incremental, discrete outputs and results can be identified. Some agile project approaches are appropriate for many types of projects and a mix of agile approaches coupled with some traditional approaches can make organizations more agile. Some managers and organizations strive for as contingent or a hybrid approach - a mix of agile and more traditional processes. Agile product and software development is incremental and emphasizes working products at the end of each project development sprint. For software, an agile method results in working, tested, deployable software delivered incrementally. Build, test, release, build is the mantra. The systems development life cycle remains especially important and useful for large-scale, enterprise-wide projects.

Planning, analytics, and decision support are needed and important, even vital, in an agile culture and process. Responding to change is however more important than blindly following a static plan. Gutman (2019) describes and advocates for using both "analytic" and "learning" planning and plans to guide agile activities and processes. One would expect managers in organizations should adopt similar approaches. According to Gutman, an "analytic" plan breaks "a complex problem into smaller, more manageable pieces, plans them really well and in advance, and then derives the overall plan from the small parts". He argues "the 'analytic plan' is not very effective to be done fully upfront when the least amount of information is available". A "learning" plan looks at what must be learned to reach a goal. It is adaptive, subject to pivoting, and change. A learning plan addresses challenges, risks, assumptions, unknowns, external dependencies, and knowledge gaps at the beginning of a project and then it is updated as needs change.

Agile approaches have the following shared characteristics: 1) more frequent interactions among project teams and stakeholders, 2) shorter and more frequent project reviews, 3) increased two-way communication, including face-to-face where possible, and 4) a more collaborative project environment (see <https://www.pmis-consulting.com/what-types-of-projects-can-agile-be-applied-to/>). In an Agile operation or project environment, there should be no rigid constraints. Scope, time/schedule, and cost can and should be adjusted as needed and required. Quality and collaboration should remain the only immutable or unchanging goals, cf., Dhillon, 2018; Ray, 2019. In general, large scope projects are riskier than small scope projects.

Agility can create an asymmetry, an imbalance of resources between competing or adversarial sides

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in an economic or political contest. In this situation where an organization is more nimble, has greater agility, and leverages new technology 'weaker' competitors can take unexpected advantage. For example in business, an individual entrepreneur competing with bureaucratic, regulated companies can disrupt an industry. Think of Uber or Airbnb. Agility can help David defeat Goliath.

Becoming more agile is important for individuals, teams, and organizations for three major reasons: 1) the requirements for faster, more responsive execution requires a reduction in bureaucratic processes, 2) changing technology environments reward more customer-focused processes, and 3) rapid internal collaboration and communication that is coordinated using technology is both possible and a requirement for successful individuals, teams and organizations. Agile processes meet new needs created by the digital disruption of industries and organizations. Agility helps us change and adapt to dynamic environments. We all need to learn new dances and we need to dance faster much of the time. We all need to be able to change dances in an elegant and seamless way, depending upon the need. Agile teams don't necessarily translate into agility, rather strategic agility requires agile teams for many tasks that have a customer-centric focus, cf., Almeida, 2018. Agile is part of a long term strategy for digital transformation. Combine changes in the business model with digital transformation into an agile workplace. Remember a good dancer who is dancing with a partner must dance in harmony, shared joy, and synchronicity. Dance together.

Agile can be disruptive to current practices and attitudes. That's ok. New dances are good and knowing a mix of dances and practicing them adds variety and interest. The goal is to be agile and to learn new dances. Practices and tools are sterile and empty. How you think about work is the most important change associated with agile and agility. Dance the night away, just dance. Dance on!

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