

## PM WORLD BOOK REVIEW



Book Title: ***Agile Approaches on Large Projects in Large Organizations***

Author: **Brian Hobbs and Yvan Petit**

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### Introduction

This book provides an interesting summary of an implementation problem set that is still evolving. While agile approaches are doing well in their “sweet spot”, that is not the case for their implementation for large projects in large organizations. The authors acknowledge at the beginning and end that they are likely leaving the reader with more questions than answers. But they certainly lay out critical areas of context for implementation that will help the reader understand what they would face with implementing agile approaches in a large organization.

### Overview of Book’s Structure

The book is laid out in a straightforward manner beginning with a short executive summary and an introduction to the study as a whole. The study is designed to address agile approaches in terms of individual projects and the context in which they are carried out. It also looks to provide insight into progress in scaling agile practices beyond single teams and single projects.

A literary review sets the stage by providing baseline definitions for agile practices and their benefits, insight into using agile at scale and the evolution of scaling frameworks, and finally a look at agile’s relationship with organizational culture and team approaches. Next, the authors outline their methodology – a combination of case studies of six organizations and a survey.

The majority of the book follows with the results of the study. To begin, the characteristics of the organizations studied are outlined in terms of context – public or private sector, size, primary activity and use of the agile approach. Then comes a segment on the implementation of agile approaches in each organization. A short section discusses front-end planning and architecture. Next are results centering on the project organizations with an emphasis on team structure and roles. Finally, tools

and techniques and applicable scaling frameworks are covered. The results conclude with a short portrait as provided by the results.

The authors complete their efforts with a short discussion segment covering team level, project level and the interaction between the project and the organization. Then they present their conclusion and remaining questions that deserve future research.

## Highlights

The following are a few of my key takeaways from the book:

- After defining the agile sweet spot – small teams working on small non-critical greenfield projects - the authors related stories of organizations struggling to scale agile activity beyond the sweet spot. Their core research question is how to adapt agile approaches to the context of large organizations. In other words, how can you redefine product ownership and promote “self-management” at scale in large organizations while facing coordination and interpretation, requirements engineering and QA challenges?
- They found that the relevant organizational context is not the entire organization but that “part” of the organization that actually produces the system. In the context discussion, they noted projects measured by staff size seem to have issues with cost and organizational culture while projects measured by number of development teams are more likely to have an agile coach and dedicated skills and more releases rather than sprints prior to integration and release.
- Difficulty in committing to project parameters is related to project approval processes that require a scope and project plan up front as per traditional waterfall approaches when agile groups might be changing scope from sprint to sprint. This issue aligns with implementation problems driven by a focus on immediate delivery, results and on features rather than on components which can lead to a short-term view and in tune neglect issues of technical debt.
- Management support is the most prevalent issue faced by all six case study organizations. Lack of adherence with middle and project managers and issues with role definitions that are not aligned with agile impact the success of an agile implementation.
- Most implementations begin with pilot projects – with varying definitions of size and scope - but more accurately defined as “safe zones with local champions for all studied implementations.”
- Finally, a Scrum of Scrums was the most frequently used scaling method where Scrum Masters meet regularly with other participants including project and product managers. The importance of the linkage and coordination between agile actions and traditional PM roles and authorities was described as an essential factor for success.

## **Highlights: What I liked!**

As the discussion of context played out in the results section, I liked how the book noted that change to agile approaches is often motivated by the demands of young qualified software developers. They are not looking for command and control leadership but rather “servant leadership” climates. In this case, agile can even be a recruiting tool. I also liked how they noted the importance of resources – human and financial – to support implementation of agile through change management efforts. Involving up-front training, agile coaches, well supported change agents made a major difference in the success of agile implementations.

Where agile practices were not well established, it was noted that organizations chose contexts where they are more likely to be accepted and to succeed. Predetermined client acceptance and the willingness of human resources to use agile approaches are at the top of that list. The need to establish new roles - Scrum Master and Product Owner – was a central theme of their findings. And it was important that their role definitions actually align with agile doctrine. Who they represent, how close they are to the customer, where they are aligned and if they have the necessary authority are key.

## **Who might benefit from the Book?**

There are 3 audiences who might benefit from reading this book:

- CEOs, CIOs and other technology leaders considering the impacts and benefits of implementing agile methodologies in a large organization.
- Project managers who want to take on a more strategic role in an organization implementing agile methodologies.
- Any agile practitioner who wants to get a better picture of the variability they will face when working on an agile project.

## **Conclusion**

No surprises, management support is still the most critical success factor identified for a successful agile implementation. This includes leadership both being knowledgeable of agile and willing to manage with an agile mindset when dealing with clients and traditional KPIs. Ultimately, they need to be more involved, willing to commit resources, better understand and prioritize their needs and respond quickly to requests for clarification of business rules and priorities. With this and a feel for the necessary contextual changes outlined in this study, a successful agile implementation in a large organization is possible. This book provides insight into this context and so is worth the read.

For more about this book, go to: <https://www.pmi.org/learning/academic-research/agile-approaches-on-large-projects-in-large-organizations> or <https://marketplace.pmi.org/Pages/ProductDetail.aspx?GMProduct=00101602601>

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## About the Reviewer



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**Keith Dever** is a transformational leader with a successful record of driving superior operations and demonstrated leadership ability in enabling rapid growth within organizations. His expertise lies in successfully creating and implementing strategic operational processes, coaching and developing employees, and managing technology programs and organization operations efforts to realize business operations improvements while overseeing a wide variety of operational responsibilities to ensure outstanding organizational oversight and optimize financial performance across a variety of industries. These include: client-facing program/project management and strategy transformation support, solution content development, business development and organization operations management, major business segment level financial management, budget development and oversight and policy and procedure reporting and control. And most recently, analytics and visualization, innovation and technology operations management for innovation services spaces, and propose/design/build/execute/operate cycles for technology centric spaces and events.

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