

Agile is a Mindset

Interview with Henny Portman ^{1,2}

Advisor, Coach, Agile Thought Leader
Portman PM(O) Consultancy
The Netherlands



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Introduction to the interviewee

Henny Portman is owner of Portman PM(O) Consultancy and partner of HWP Consulting. He has 40 years of experience in the project management domain. He was the project management office (PMO) thought leader within NN Group and responsible for the introduction and application of the PMO methodologies (portfolio, programme and project management) across Europe and Asia. He trains, coaches and directs (senior) programme, project and portfolio managers and project sponsors at all levels, and has built several professional PM(O) communities.

¹ This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at <http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>

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He is an accredited P3O, PRINCE2, MSP, MoP, PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePM, AgilePgM, and AgileSHIFT trainer and a SPC4 SAFe consultant and trainer too. He is a P3M3 trainer and assessor and PMO Value Ring Certified Consultant. On behalf of the IPMA, he assesses (large and mega) projects for the Project Excellence Award. In addition, Henny is an international speaker and author of many articles and books in the PM(O) field and blogger (hennyportman.wordpress.com). Henny can be contacted at henny.portman@gmail.com.

Interview

About Agile

Q1. Having read your profile, I'm impressed by the word "Agile", which exists with the highest frequency. How do you define "Agile"? How to decide how Agile a project should be?

Henny Portman (Portman): For me, 'Agile' is a mindset. This means whether it is a traditional project or an Agile project, you are running a project and use the Agile mindset to determine how much Agile practices can be applied to deliver a more successful project. Take some of the Agile principles for example: frequent delivery and maximizing the amount of work not done. This means you deliver a part of your service or product to your customer and ask for feedback. Based on the feedback, you can delete some requested requirements or adjust the product and create an even better product. If you prioritize your requirements and start with the most important ones, you could stop at the time agreed and not deliver the less important ones. But this is not always possible. If you have to build a bridge, the frequent delivery/feedback will not be possible, and I hope all safety related requirements will not be skipped due to an agreed delivery date.

Q2. What is your book 'scaling Agile' mainly about?

Portman: Two-fold. Firstly, I look at the project organization and follow a journey where I start with one individual permanent Agile team using e.g. Scrum and I am adding more and more of these kind of teams. Then I ask myself if there is still a role for a project manager when there is both a product owner and scrum master. You can imagine that when having one or a few teams the project manager is just overhead but if there are a lot of teams you need someone who oversees the dependencies between the teams, who understands which team needs to start first with what, etc. This could be a project manager but there are scaling Agile frameworks especially designed for these tasks too and then you don't need a project manager. Look for example at SAFe or LeSS.

Agile frameworks are the second part of the book. I explain in detail the most commonly used Agile ways of working. Think about Scrum, Kanban, lean, SAFe, Nexus, Scrum at Scale, LeSS, Disciplined Agile, Spotify model, PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePM and AgileSHIFT. Besides these ways of working, I have a separate chapter where I explain in less detail other Agile ways of working.

Q3. You've written an article titled "Culture Makes or Breaks Your Agile Transition". So what role does culture play in Agile transition?

Portman: Culture means everything. You can put a lot of effort in training Agile teams, helping them to get a thorough understanding of the value stream they are supporting, setting up Kanban boards to manage the flow of work and on the other hand having senior management who is not willing to decentralize decision making or senior management who haven't mandated product owners or are even overruling product owners. However, if they don't believe in the Agile manifesto and principles and ask for detailed requirement documents and plans upfront, your Agile transition will be a failure.

Q4. One of your articles "A bird's Eye View of the Agile Forest" in PMWJ sounds interesting. Would you please introduce the article?

Portman: This article helps you to get an understanding of the many Agile ways of working that exist. It is built around a figure where I position all types of Agile frameworks. In this figure I use different levels. The team level where I position e.g. Scrum, Kanban, DevOps and below this level the engineering level where I position XP, Test Driven Development, CI/CD and many more. Next you have the product or program level where I make the distinction between one-time projects and programs (e.g. PRINCE2 Agile, AgilePgM) and the business as usual / indefinite ways of working using permanent Agile teams (e.g. SAFe or LeSS). The last level is portfolio management and there is a specific group showing all culture targeted Agile frameworks. In the article you can find for every way of working a source where you can find more information.

By the way, this article is a great example of creating an article using an Agile mindset. It started in my book *Scaling Agile*, and then asked for others to come up with other examples of Agile frameworks, published next versions of the article in project management journals (in different languages e.g., Dutch, English, Portuguese, Russian) to reach as many people as possible and now I have the final article with 100 different Agile ways of working.

About portfolio management

Q5. How do you measure the maturity of a portfolio? You've co-authored articles about project creatures. How do you think of comparing projects to creatures, which is so vivid?

Portman: Let's give an example. I was appointed as a regional portfolio manager and one of my first tasks was to help the organization to achieve their objectives. It took far too long before projects were finished. I started to collect some basic data about the inflight projects. In total, there are 10 business units with approximately 600 projects and 4000 people. I asked the regional CEO how many people are working in his region. He said 3500 people. I explained to him that I noticed firefighting all over the place. There was a big shortage of project resources and I explained that too many projects were running in parallel. We had to kill projects. I have seen projects without a project owner, projects which did not contribute to the strategic objectives, re-started projects with a different name, etc. It helped us understand by using the project creatures as metaphors to explain, for example, a ghost project, a pet project and a fake nose project.

About PMO

Q6. Will PMOs survive in the Agile world? In your opinion, what are the trends of PMO?

Portman: I see two types of PMO: the temporary project or program offices and the permanent PMO or portfolio office / center of excellence. If you are running a traditional project, a project office can bring benefits. If the project is delivered via permanent Agile teams (probably product or IT development), I don't see much added value for having a project office. Traditional tasks such as onboarding, reporting, risk/issue management, planning will not exist or will be done by the Agile team members themselves. If we look at the permanent PMO, I don't believe they will vanish because portfolio management is still key to answering the questions: Are we doing the right projects? Are we doing projects right? Are we reaching our objectives? Portfolio management will probably be looking at traditional as well as Agile projects. The up and down scaling of your permanent Agile teams due to the strategy will be a new activity for the portfolio management office. Also the center of excellence, sometimes called the lean-Agile center of excellence, is often part of the PMO and could add a lot of value to the organization by delivering data points, insights in ways of working, coaching, facilitation, etc.

Q7. In the VUCA world, how should a PMO position itself? In other words, what roles will PMOs play in the VUCA world?

Portman: In the VUCA world, I would say the PMO or portfolio office / center of excellence becomes even more important. It doesn't make sense anymore to create annual portfolio plans. The world around us will look different when we are halfway. PMOs must probably use a sort of quarterly heartbeat to align the portfolio to the organization's strategic objectives. Portfolio management is key in the VUCA world to make sure you are not investing in the wrong initiatives, that you are using your scarce resources for the right initiatives, etc.

Q8. You've said that the PMO is a flywheel for pragmatic programme management. Would you please explain it?

Portman: A long time ago, I spoke about that topic. During that session I talked about Managing Successful Programme Management (MSP) as a foundation for programme management. I explained that at that time a common lament was that the PMO was just a few process cops and paper pushers emailing PMO's demands, self-centered... I looked at active and passive PMOs and discussed the impact of an active PMOs on the success of your programme. Active PMOs are not only observing and reporting but take among other things the lead when something is moving in the wrong direction.

About the PM profession

Q9. How will you describe the profession of project management?

Portman: If we look at the latest figures from the Standish group's CHAOS reports, we have to conclude that there is still a long way to go for the profession of project management. The number of successful projects is still far too low. If I look at my article "A bird's Eye View of the Agile Forest", you can conclude that we are continuously looking for different ways of working and that we still haven't found the silver bullet. On the other hand, I see organizations embracing Agile ways of working, and firing their project managers. But after six months they started hiring project managers again. Sometimes with different names but their role is more or less the same. I think that having permanent Agile teams will reduce the number of project managers but there will always be hybrid projects using permanent Agile teams as well as temporary teams. I also believe that the project manager's competences will move towards those from programme managers combined with an Agile mindset. Just delivering output is not enough. Delivering the benefits and achieving strategic objectives in the shortest sustainable way is key and that's something project managers need to take into account, too.

Q10. Has COVID-19 affected your life and work? With virtual work getting popular, how do you think PMO should adjust way of working in practice?

Portman: In my personal life, I have really missed the social part of life. I am looking forward to the moment when we can go again to a restaurant, theater or museum with my family or with friends or when I can hug my kids again etc. Looking at my work, I have really missed the opportunities to go abroad and give lectures at universities, to speak at conferences, to do workshops and give training classes, etc. I now give a lot of webinars but I still miss the opportunity to absorb the local culture. I review books and write a lot of articles, whitepapers and books by myself and that's something I can do on my own. But I definitely see that the number of training classes and workshops declines. From time to time, I give training online but we still like to do this face to face. If I look at PMOs, then I think they can be of great help to project managers too in this COVID-19 period. Look at

all those tools to support project teams, tools to visualize the work by using electronic Kanban boards or tools to facilitate information gathering, brainstorming or discussion where everyone can add stickies or post-its to a digital whiteboard. It's the PMO who could be the product owner for these tools and the trainer of these tools or the facilitator during meetings when we are using these tools. The PMO can/must play a much more active role in facilitating the project manager.

Q11. The concept “Sustainable (Green) Project Management” encourages project professionals to take on social responsibilities. What’s your understanding about it?

Portman: Here in the Netherlands, there is a lot of discussion on the energy transition. It means moving away from fossil fuel towards wind and solar energy as one of the means to create a more sustainable environment. As a project excellence assessor of large and mega projects on behalf of the IPMA, one of the topics is sustainability. We look at, among other things, the consideration of sustainability and the impact of the project on the environment as prerequisites for project excellence. I see that sustainability becomes more and more important.

To read the original interview and to learn more about PMR magazine, visit
<http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/>



About the Interviewer



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Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for *Project Management Review* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring also serves as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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