

Advances in Project Management Series ¹

Is it time to rethink agile? ²

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The world continues to defy our best laid plans, schemes and designs. The dream of creating agile, responsive, nimble and adaptive enterprises capable of sensing and responding to emerging challenges, discontinuous change, turbulent shocks, environmental jolts, unexpected vulnerabilities and emergent opportunities is well documented (see for example, Levinthal & March, 1981; Meyer 1982; Daft & Lengel, 1983; Daft & Weick, 1984; Haeckel 1999). Leaders have therefore long sought improved methods and approaches for resetting management and reshaping organisations. Many now maintain that concepts such as agile project management and business agility offer just such capability. In an earlier article (Dalcher, 2021a) we explored the mindsets needed for scaling experimentation and supporting innovation at a sustained level ranging all the way from small-scale change to a business-wide perspective. This month, we revisit the origin and source of agile thinking in order to question its enduring relevance and the way that it has been adopted and embraced. Moreover, the reflection inevitably looks to re-evaluate if agile was our missed chance to recalibrate our modes of working, doing and being adaptive.

In the beginning: The agile manifesto?

The Agile Manifesto, often referred to as the source of everything agile, was formulated in February 2001 when a group of 17 leading software developers assembled at US retreat and formulated a powerful statement of intent. A lot has changed since the release of that declaration. Agile approaches have been adopted, embedded and deployed in many sectors, areas and domains, including project management; however, the field remains contested and ambiguous with many different and competing flavours, approaches and interpretations. So, with agile at 21 it seems apt to pause and reflect on whether agile has come of age (as claimed by Denning 2018), and consider if we are entering the dawn of the much-heralded new age of agile, or witnessing an inevitable decline of an overly hyped trend (Cram & Newell 2016).

¹The PMWJ *Advances in Project Management series* includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Routledge publishers worldwide. Each month an introduction to the current article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Routledge books on new and emerging concepts in PM. Prof Dalcher's article is an introduction to the invited paper this month in the PMWJ. See Darren's background and qualifications at the end of this article.

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Agile comes in an ever-growing range and number of different flavours, all adhering to the initial articulation of agile as the function and the direct result of the manifesto. Many books, articles and papers have been dedicated to exploring agile ways of working. Indeed, when people describe what agile means, for example in published sources or available courses, they inevitably start with the agile manifesto. The manifesto lays the foundation for agile thinking and working by introducing what is referred to as the values of agile software development through four comparative statements summarising the main preferences and important concerns. This is followed by the articulation of the 12 key principles which embed and embody the essence of agile software development.

After more than two decades, this statement of intent remains unaltered, marking a contextual departure point in the agile chronicles. It has also been translated into more than 60 languages. The manifesto captures a snapshot of a moment, summarising an important conversation and agreement reached by that particular group on that one occasion. More than 20,000 individuals had signed the declaration by July 2016, at the point when the document was sealed and finalised as a historical manuscript, and a marker in time (compared by some of the original attendees to the status of the US Declaration of Independence).

The power of words

Words can be used to create, destroy, sustain and kill. Words enable a vision to become a reality, turning a textual description into a concept that can be distributed across a community and developed jointly. They play an important part in facilitating, sharing and collaboration, as well as in selling and marketing. Indeed, Weil (1962/2020) notes the role of manipulation through words by the powerful as a way of satisfying needs related to order, equality, liberty and truth. Indeed, Wilson (2006) examines how Abraham Lincoln used the power of words to build his political career; revolutionise public opinion on critical issues such as civil liberties and the emancipation of slaves; and, attempt to keep the country united during the US Civil War, whilst Martin Gilbert (2012), Churchill's official biographer, explores how Churchill used words to argue for moral causes, advocate action and report on his feelings, struggles and achievements.

Distilling the essence of agile development into these all-important 254 words requires exceptional precision. Words can clearly make a difference. The agile values and principles articulated in the manifesto continue to shape agile thinking, providing the common ambition and focus for all methods and approaches seeking to qualify as agile and be included under the ever-expanding metaphorical agile umbrella. It would be all too easy to lapse into pronouncing the values as key mantras, or to rehearse the 16 principles at the foundation of all agile approaches. This is where most agile courses begin and these aspects are very well covered elsewhere. Instead, it is worth recognising that a mere 68 words contain the core values that continue to define agile. Another 186 words define the twelve principles that embody real agility. It is impressive to note that dozens, or perhaps even hundreds, of agile methods, approaches and frameworks have been fashioned from a mere 254 words. Casting an eye across an agile bookshelf would reveal that each such instantiation, or every detailed

volume describing an individual method, would often extend across several hundred pages thereby representing a unique collection of branded and collocated practices that are meant to adhere to the agile values and principles articulated in 254 words.

More recently, agile has been successful in transforming the mindsets, expectations and imagination of executives and managers alike. For a short document containing four bullet points consisting of a mere 68 words, the Agile Manifesto seems to have engendered a full-scale revolution beyond what may have been envisaged by the original co-authors.

Note: It is worth pointing out that it is still being debated if the twelve principles are considered to be part of the agile manifesto or whether the one-page statement of value is the core of the manifesto.

The interest in agile development continues to rise and their use often seems to dominate, particularly in the software sector. Indeed, HBR (2015) noted, in a research report sponsored by Atlassian Solutions, that: *“Agile development practices have steadily risen to become a trusted and preferred method of development for software teams everywhere. Using agile, organizations can respond to market changes faster, deliver higher quality software, and gain a significant competitive edge.”*

Many organisations are becoming increasingly aware of the potential of agile approaches and are seeking informed guidance and support. The multiplicity of sources and authorities on the subject has led to contradictory and confusing advice. A previous article in this series explored the power and peril of standards in enabling and facilitating new discussions and discoveries (Dalcher, 2021b). This can offer added context regarding the role and impact of standards, especially as words are so important in positioning, motivating and creating distinctions. The guest article this month looks to make sense of agility in existing standards and other professional publications in project management. Robert Buttrick draws on his recent books, *the Project Workout*, 5th edition (Buttrick, 2019), and *the Programme and Portfolio Workout* (Buttrick, 2020), published by Routledge, as well as his recent work on a number of standards initiatives. He sets out by identifying different perspectives and interpretations of agile, primarily from a project management perspective, before moving on to explore the differences between life cycles and delivery approaches. His mission is to determine how agile and its derivatives are used in a range of standards and other working documents with a view to highlighting, understanding and reconciling the apparent differences. This ultimately enables him to revisit the definitions of agile, position the context and develop a set of recommendations for making sense of agile projects.

The Agile Manifesto at 20 – An original co-author’s assessment

Robert Martin played was the key player in initiating and organising the 2001 agile get together. He has maintained an interest in agile software development and programming and the development of the discipline. In 2021 he lamented that the agile scene was becoming messy. The problem, in his view, is that agile became popular and the names of popular

movements become blurred through misunderstanding and usurpation as others try to cash in on the popularity, recognition and significance of the name (Martin, 2021). Two decades after the 2001 gathering he set about writing a short book to set the record straight and describe agile without the nonsense, embellishments and extensions that in his view pervade and complicate agile. His reflection on the development of agile expressed in the introduction to his new book is worth recounting:

“This is a small book. That’s because the topic isn’t very big. Agile is a small idea about the small problem of small programming teams doing small things. Agile is not a big idea about the big problem of big programming teams doing big things. It’s somewhat ironic that this small solution to a small problem has a name. After all, the small problem in question was solved in the 1950s and ’60s, almost as soon as software was invented. Back in those days, small software teams learned to do small things rather well. However, it all got derailed in the 1970s when the small software teams doing small things got all tangled up in an ideology that thought it should be doing big things with big teams.”

“Aren’t we supposed to be doing big things with big teams? Heavens, no! Big things don’t get done by big teams; big things get done by the collaboration of many small teams doing many small things. This is what the programmers in the 1950s and ’60s knew instinctively. And it was this that was forgotten in the 1970s.” (Martin, 2021, xviii).

The problem with agile

The spirit of agile remains somewhat elusive. Tenhundfeld (2021) offers an intriguing summary of the state of agile at 20 contending that agile as a label won because nobody wanted to be labelled as non-agile; yet, agile as practiced fell woefully short of the revolutionary aspirations of its founders. The former can lead to a phenomenon known as agile in name only, whilst the latter basically means that agile is not practiced as intended. Girvan and Girvan note that agile software development is simple to understand, but difficult to master. The basic manifesto is straight forward, however successful implementation has proved challenging:

“Over the years, we have witnessed many teams struggle to apply Agile concepts consistently and successfully even with experienced teams. One of the reasons for this is that many people focus on the mechanics of Agile methods and don't give enough consideration to the underlying principles and values. The problem is that it's easy to apply the mechanical elements in ways that don't embody those values, and can even undermine them.” (Girvan & Girvan, 2022).

Girvan and Girvan (2022) observe the key reasons for failure to implement agile (slightly paraphrased) as:

- Comfort in the familiar, as software developers resort to long held values and fail to embrace agile thinking

- Too quick to customise, as teams rush to tailor the approach before seeking to apply practices correctly in the first instance
- People, people, people, as agile is highly people-centric and yet people are complex, unpredictable and wilful.

Dalcher (2008) reports on a new and emerging type of agile project failure, where governance and oversight considerations are sacrificed, or indeed not addressed, in the rush to complete autonomous agile projects. Agile-in-the-small can lead to a succession of meaningful little projects, which would require integration. Failing to provide mechanisms for such oversight can lead to the ultimate failure of initiatives and coordination failures in products and systems (Wells et al., 2015).

McGregor & Doshi (2018) similarly observe a rush to implement agile software development. However, they note that many organisations have done so in ways that make them less agile. Such companies, and projects become agile in name only, as the processes that they employ damage motivation and productivity. In the rush to deliver agile projects companies can become too tactical and obsessed with processes, tools and micromanagement, or too adaptive and informal, thereby losing sight of long-term goals, timelines, logical links, wider qualities or cross-functional collaborations.

Martin Fowler, one of the original co-authors, laments that the influx of non-technical people and project managers into the agile domain has impoverished the agile concept and the concerns of the remaining technical people are being usurped by those of the project managers (Nyce, 2017).

Robert Martin, another of the co-authors, has regularly raised similar issues. Over the last decade he has remained concerned that agile development has lost its way. In particular, he has observed an unhealthy and growing interest from project managers:

“The influx of project managers into the Agile movement changed its emphasis rather dramatically. Instead of Agile being a small idea about getting small teams to do relatively small projects, it turned into a way to manage projects in some bold new way that people could not articulate.”

“What we see today now is Agile is very popular on the project management side and not very popular on the technical programming side. There are remnants of technical Agile such as Test-Driven Development and refactoring, but that’s prevalent in the technical community and not the Agile community.”

“Does the Agile Manifesto help the project management side of things? Yes of course, because about half of Agile was about project management, but the other half — the technical side — that part fled. And so the project management side of Agile is now lacking the technical side and in that sense, it has not been a good evolution from the early days of the manifesto till today. It has been a separation, not a unification. I’m still waiting for that unification.”

“Without that unification, there will be an increasing number of software catastrophes... We cannot have programmers out there without some kind of technological disciplines that govern the way they work, and that’s what Agile was supposed to be. It was supposed to be this kind of governance umbrella over both project management and technology, and that split. Now many [technologists] are free to do what they want without any kind of discipline.” (Robert Martin, reported in, Nyce, 2017).

Martin and others blame the lack of integration over the amalgamation of project management and technology and the resulting separation between disciplines for potential accidents and disasters. McGregor & Doshi (2018) recommend a number of solutions (slightly paraphrased) that might be able to help:

1. Treat software development as a no-handoff collaborative process
2. Make minimal viable experiments the unit of delivery for teams
3. Adopt a customer-centric approach
4. Utilise timeboxing to focus experimentation and avoid waste
5. Organise each team to emphasise collaboration
6. Constantly review the process (within the team)

Is agile the solution?

Agile has created a revolution, but it might be useful to revisit the specific setting and conditions under which it was “discovered” and raise a number of pertinent questions:

Context: The agile summit in 2001 was attended by 17 senior programmers with an interest in utilising light-weight software development processes. These were 17 of the most experienced programmers and external consultants. The resulting Agile Manifesto is the output from this group. It is actually about agile software development and delivery.

- Can the notion of agile software development simply be imported into project management?
- Is there any evidence that it is transferable? Are we introducing a new risk by doing so?
- Agile what? (**Note:** the ISO study group looking at the need for a new standard focused on agile/adaptive management has recognised that the concept of ‘agile project management’ does not exist, although we can talk about agile projects and agility in projects)
- Is the wide-scale adoption of agile projects actually harming software development?
- Given the concerns about integration between the functions, are we creating new silos?

Reflection: The agile summit is a good example of a group of leading experts getting together and trying to resolve an issue that is a major concern within a discipline. This is rather typical

of software development and software engineering of the 1980s and 1990s. A similar example can be argued to be the development of DSDM as a consortium of companies sharing good practice in order to address common challenges. The emergence of software engineering as a discipline was similarly due to the sharing of concerns about failing software projects.

- Are we still doing that?
- Do we have experts' summits?
- Do we still create similar opportunities to share insights and good practice ideas?
- Are we able to bring together competitors for the (common) good of the field or discipline, especially given some of the demanding social and sustainable targets?

Responsibility: Many of the above concerns can come under responsibility and good citizenship labels. But these areas need to be addressed.

- Who is looking after the responsibility agenda?
- Is good citizenship of interest?

Reflection: The original invitation sent to the expert was for the lightweight process summit.

- What if the summit had retained the original title?
- Would it have had the same impact and become the same all-embracing global phenomena?
- Some of the delegates preferred the term adaptive.
- What would adaptive software development have given us?
- What is adaptive management?
- Is agile part of the adaptive perspective? If so, what else is included?
- How do we adapt?
- Finishing a wide circle leading back to the beginning of the article, how do we create adaptive organisations?

The future of agile

Many of the original summit attendees have become frustrated with the way the agile concept has been misinterpreted, and particularly the increasing focus on agile coaching, training, qualifications and conferences (Nyce, 2017). Commercialisation has played a key part. The net result is to shift emphasis onto what can be copied, monetised, boxed up and standardised. For instance, the first value in the agile manifesto emphasises people and relationships over processes and tools, and yet rather ironically, agile processes and tools have become an obsession for many who seek to embed new formalities in the name of increasing agility.

Martin concludes his preface with the following message:

“So it’s time, once again, for us to be reminded of what our forebears knew in the ’50s and ’60s, and what we relearned in 2000. It’s time to remember what Agile really is.

In this book, you will find nothing particularly new, nothing astounding or startling, nothing revolutionary that breaks the mold. What you will find is a restatement of Agile as it was told in 2000. Oh, it’s told from a different perspective, and we have learned a few things over the last 20 years that I’ll include. But overall, the message of this book is the message of 2001 and the message of 1950.

It’s an old message. It’s a true message. It’s a message that gives us the small solution to the small problem of small software teams doing small things.” (Martin, 2021, xx)

Martin’s reflection also reminds us that the agile conversation calls on earlier concepts, approaches and perspectives that have been well understood and yet, seem to have got forgotten (Benediktsson et al., 2006; Dalcher & Brodie, 2007). Constantly and repetitively reinventing the wheel may not be the most sensible strategy (Dalcher, 2019; 2022)

Dave Thomas another of the original manifesto co-authors observes that agile should be addressed as an adjective, not a noun (Cardoza, 2021), for as soon as one starts talking about an agile thing, it contradicts the very logic of being agile: *“The whole essence of the manifesto is that everything changes, and change is inevitable. And yet, once you start talking about ‘Agile’ as a thing, then you’ve frozen it”* (Dave Thomas, reported in Cardoza, 2021). There might be a very important question lurking here – in our search for guidance and uniformity, are we fossilising our insights and capabilities, and threatening our abilities to solve problems, experiment and innovate?

Indeed, the real power and appeal of agile approaches probably lies in the liberating element that enables wider resourcefulness, autonomy and exploration. Liberation gives people permission to ask questions, to seek and to explore. It gives us a license us to discover, to find out. Moreover, by its very nature it eliminates harnesses and straightjackets, replacing them with agency, the power and autonomy to make decisions, do experiments, try things out, and figure out what to do next. In doing so it also fosters loyalty, creativity and a deeper sense of purpose and achievement, the real hallmarks needed for developing responsible, deliberative and reflective professionals.

Reflecting does not always lead to formulating brand new and exciting insights; instead, it could lead to the development of enhanced understanding and to revising old ideas and perspectives. The power of reflection is in opening up a wider vista of experiences and enabling fresh insights over a larger and more wide-ranging canvass, ultimately offering greater potential for value and innovation.

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