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Interview with Heidi Musser
by Yasmina Khelifi
Interview

Agile is a Fundamentally Different Way of Thinking and Never Stop Learning[1]

Interview with Heidi Musser

Board Member | Board Advisor | CxO
Executive Consultant |TEDx Speaker
Board Chair, Agile Alliance

Interviewed by Yasmina Khelifi
International Correspondent, PM World Journal
Paris, France

Introduction to the interviewee

Heidi Musser is an accomplished Board member, Board advisor and C-level executive who advises and leads businesses on digital transformation and enterprise agility. She has successfully created and scaled resilient and sustainable organizational structures, business, and governance models that can withstand rapidly and dynamically changing market conditions and play an integral role in achieving competitive advantage in this next economic revolution.

Heidi serves on the Board of Directors of Cprime, Inc. – a leading global Agile, product, and technology consulting firm. She is Chair of the Board of Directors for Agile Alliance, having

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served on its Board since 2018. She is also a member of the Advisory Board of Michigan Council of Women in Technology.

Heidi has domain expertise in strategy, enterprise sustainability, business agility, information technology, innovation, design thinking, governance, risk management, regulatory compliance, and DEI&B. A life-long learner with insatiable curiosity, she's achieved extraordinary results and transformational outcomes in five different business models in complex, regulated environments. A respected thought leader in the Agile community, her passion is helping people adopt agile values and principles so that we can bring our whole selves to work and thrive in the world of digital disruption.

Heidi has been at the forefront of championing and mentoring women in leadership and technology throughout her career and speaks frequently on DEI&B, LGBTQ in Tech, and women in STEM. Most recently, she keynoted Agile in Chile 2023. In 2014, she was nominated to STEMconnector's® list of 100 Diverse Corporate Leaders in STEM. linkedin.com/in/hjmusser https://www.heidimusser.com

Interview

Q1:   First of all, thank you for accepting an interview request from PMWJ. By reading your website I've seen Agile is probably the most used word. What's your definition of agile?

Heidi Musser (Musser):   Agile is a fundamentally different way of working, thinking, and being. To be agile is to be resilient, adaptable, and willing to embrace change. To be agile also means adopting an agile mindset that begins with meeting people where they are. This mindset intrinsically includes the dimensions of understanding, comprehension, and imagination because:

- Agile is relentlessly focused
- Agile is listening to understand
- Agile is courageous

It's my belief that we are ALL capable of becoming agile - **relentlessly focusing**, **listening to understand, acting with courage** - and embracing this fundamentally different way of thinking and being. We are NOT powerless – we never really are. We ALWAYS have a choice.

With this new agile mindset, we have the POWER to effectively adapt to change *if* we are willing to adopt 3 simple practices:

- Willing to ask for help, for this is the key to humility
- Willing to make mistakes, for this is the key to curiosity and learning

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- Willing to recognize others, for this is the key to compassion

My TED Talk, *Everything Must Change. Including YOU.*, describes these dimensions in much greater detail.

Q2: Agile practices in projects are sometimes misinterpreted: can you explain to us when and how to use Agile practices in projects?

Musser: The core values in the Agile Manifesto are:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools.
- Working software over comprehensive documentation.
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation.
- Responding to change over following a plan.

If we think of Agile practices from the perspective of these core values, key practices that are relevant in almost any project include:

- Focus on continuously adding value for customers
- Articulate the definition of done
- Do the simplest thing that works
- Test and learn
- Welcome frequent feedback

These values and practices are all based on *relentless collaboration* – **working together on the same thing at the same time, with the same common goal.** They are also fundamentally about *people* and empowering teams.

Because agile is about people, these practices provide transparency into the things that truly matter on most projects:

- What are people **discovering**?
- Do people understand the **nature of the dependencies**?
- What **experiments** are people and teams running and why?
- What are people **learning**?
- Are people **asking for help**?

Finally, a word about feedback. If I could only measure one thing as a team embarks on a new project, it would be the number of feedback loops. Why? Because this is where the learning takes place.

- It is through feedback that we grow - *when we know better, we do better*.
- It is through making mistakes that we learn and build resilience.
- It is through resilience that people build confidence.

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Healthy feedback loops are the basis of empowerment. Empowered teams deliver successful projects.

Q3: You also write: "My passion for Agile stems from my passion for people".

Musser: Yes, the very first lesson I learned about technology – in 1986 – is that people are more important than technology. Because technology and projects are about change; and, change is ALWAYS about people, this makes change really, really hard.

As I noted previously, Agile is a fundamentally different way of working, thinking and being. At its core, Agile is about human behavior and how we interact with each other. Because it is contrary to traditional management practices, it demands a new **culture**, **language, mindset,** and **engagement & operating models**. Unfortunately, most organizations are NOT designed for optimizing human potential.

I am frequently asked why so many projects, digital strategies, and agile transformations fail. Well, the answer is that change is really, really hard. Furthermore, these efforts also ignore the people and the culture of the organization that is transforming. I believe that antidote to these epic failures is to focus on the people. Indeed, management guru Peter Drucker noted, "The purpose of an organization is to enable ordinary human beings to do extraordinary things".

People are the core of Agile.

Q4: You serve at the Agile Alliance Board of Directors. What are your roles there? Is it a volunteer role if I may ask?

Musser: I have had the privilege or serving on Agile Alliance Board of Directors since 2018. I've been on the Executive Committee since 2020, first in the role of Treasurer, and these past two years as the Board Chair. All Directors serve as volunteers without compensation.

Agile Alliance is a 501(c)6 trade association. Since 2001, we have been inspiring people and organizations as they explore and apply agile values, principles, and practices to make the software industry productive, humane, and sustainable in accordance with the Agile Manifesto.

Q5: How can Agile Project Management (APM) contribute to that education?

Musser: First, there are probably as many definitions of APM as there are of Agile. For purposes of this discussion, let me say that APM is an iterative approach to managing projects that focuses on continuous releases and incorporating stakeholder feedback with every iteration. Some would suggest that there are 5 phases of APM: envision, speculate, explore, adapt, and close. Like more traditional project management, all phases are performed for every project. The key is to ensure that feedback loops are embedded in each of APM's phases

AND empowering teams to pivot so they can respond to both problems and opportunities rapidly.

APM, when fully aligned with Agile values and principles, can deliver extraordinary benefits to organizations that are faced with rapid market disruptions due to technological innovations.

Q6: You are also a passionate advocate for women in technology. What changes have you seen over the years?

Musser: A quick scan of the workforce numbers for Women in Tech tells us that 57% of professional occupations in the 2020 US workforce were held by women. Yet only 26% of professional computing occupations in the 2021 US workforce were held by women. By the way, this is DOWN from 36% in 1991! For women of color, the data is much worse: only 3% of the computing workforce were African American, 7% were Asian, and just 2% were Hispanic. Furthermore, only 13% of CTO positions were held by women in 2020 and just 18% of CIO positions in Top 1000 companies were held by women in 2019. Yes, this is also decreasing. In 2018, 20% of CIO positions in Fortune 500 companies were held by women. Very sobering data!

The scan of the education numbers for women in STEM are very similar to those of the workforce. 57% of bachelor's degree recipients were women in 2020, yet only 22% of Computer & Information Sciences degree recipients were women. In 1985, this number was 37%. Yes, 35 years ago, this number was 37%.

Think about this. Between 2000 and 2012 there was a **64**% *decline* in the number of 1st year undergraduate women interested in majoring in Computer Science.

I was appalled when I learned this fact. When I was a student at Michigan State University in the late 1970's – which is when I learned how to write code - the % of women studying computer science engineering was over 32%. Several years ago, I was meeting with the Dean of the College of Engineering at my alma mater when I learnt that the number had decreased to *slightly over 10%*. Yes, this happened during my professional career – most of which has been in the leadership roles in technology.

I was 1 of the 20% of female (and lesbian) CIOs at a Fortune 50 company when I retired!

Unfortunately, we're losing even the limited diversity that does exist in STEM fields on a global basis. Some of the reasons include unsupportive work environments, lack of inspiring role models, and sacrifices that outweigh personal gains. In other words, it's sometimes really hard to enjoy what you do when you can't bring your whole self to work every day. **The quit rate for women is twice the quit rate for men.** Said differently, when job satisfaction is low, women and other marginalized groups begin to look elsewhere to fulfill their careers.

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Q7: What needs to be done to have more women in technology according to you?

Musser: We need to address the systemic sexism and racism, along with the unconscious bias that exists in both our education system and in our work environments. The first step is to admit that there is systemic sexism and racism in our education system and in our work environments. It is very real. Without acknowledgment and acceptance of the problem, change is really, really hard. Acceptance becomes the foundation for honestly, openly, and willingly developing and executing strategies to create true equity in the business world.

A wise colleague taught me years ago that, 'things are the way they are because those who are in power desire it to be that way'.

My experience in designing and leading transformation strategies in the corporate world suggests that the biggest single factor that is holding us back from confronting these realities is the fear of irrelevance.

That said, I remain optimistic because I have faith in the human spirit. We are smart. We are resilient. We can and must do better.

Q8: You describe yourself as a student. What do you mean by that?

Musser: Learning is a life-long process. The three most important words in my rather extensive vocabulary are, "I don't know.' At the end of each day, it's really not about what I know, it's about what I've learned and how I've served others. To quote one of my heroes, Maya Angelou, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

Q9: You are very active in sport, and you travelled around the world. What do you get from these activities?

Musser: As I recently introspected on my life on the 50th anniversary of Title IX, I am grateful for each of the leadership lessons I've learned throughout my life: courage, humility, selflessness, curiosity, and compassion. Some of my earliest lessons in each of these were learned on the court, in the pool, or at the field.

Most importantly, it is through sports that I developed confidence. In my athletic training, I learned to work hard, make mistakes, try again, get a little bit better, fail, and get back up again. This led to resilience, which is the core of confidence.

Did you know that, according to a recent EY Insights report – ***Why a female athlete should be your next leader*** - their research shows that 94% of C-suite women have played sports, demonstrating that sport participation can propel them into successful business careers. Why? Because when ***we*** enter the boardroom, women athletes have a unique advantage by thriving on competition, determination, and a strong work ethic. Yes, sport participation helps girls grow up healthy and confident, helps young female leaders rise, and helps C-suite leaders succeed.

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Yes, I've been blessed with the opportunity to live in different states in America and travel throughout the world. The greatest gift I've received from experiencing life from different perspectives is compassion.

Q10: Do you have a last message?

Musser: I have spent my entire life learning – sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly – the spiritual truth about change: it's not what happens to us, it's what we do with it. As the world changes around us, it's imperative that we learn how to adapt and respond to that change.

I am so incredibly grateful to all the people in my life who have trudged the road of happy destiny with me over the years. I truly stand on the shoulders of many. You have not only taught me the courage skill sets of rumbling with vulnerability, living into my values, braving trust, and learning to rise, but have also taught me the core leadership discipline: asking for help. It is now my responsibility to be there for others.

About the Interviewer

Yasmina Khelifi

Paris, France

Yasmina Khelifi, PMP, PMI- ACP, PMI-PBA is an experienced project manager in the telecom industry. Along with her 20-year career at Orange S.A. (the large French multinational telecommunications corporation), she sharpened her global leadership skills, delivering projects with major manufacturers and SIM makers. Yasmina strives for building collaborative bridges between people to make international projects successful. She relies on three pillars: project management skills, the languages she speaks, and a passion for sharing knowledge.

She is a PMP certification holder since 2013, a PMI- ACP and PMI-PBA certification holder since 2020. She is an active volunteer member at PMI France and PMI UAE, and a member of PMI Germany Chapter. French-native, she can speak German, English, Spanish, Italian, Japanese and she is learning Arabic. Yasmina loves sharing her knowledge and experiences at work, in her volunteers' activities at PMI, and in

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projectmanagement.com as a regular blogger. She is also the host and co-founder of the podcast Global Leaders Talk with Yasmina Khelifi to help people in becoming better international leaders.

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