

ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION SCIENCES

AGILITY: SAVIOR OR INFLATIONARY USE?

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Abstract: In a business context, the term “agility” became known primarily through a working methodology in the field of software development. In 2001, software developers developed the “Agile Manifesto of Software Development”. In it, they describe four values and 12 basic principles for collaboration in agile software development based on Talcott Parsons’ AGIL scheme from the 1950s (adaptation, goal attainment, integration, latency). In the last 20 years, software development has achieved a central position in our economy. As a result of this popularity, the term “agile” has also established itself as an elementary term in the management of projects, departments or entire companies beyond the software development environment. Many of the values and principles of the agile manifesto are now applied to projects or processes in other industries and the term “agile” is used in many different situations. However, the question arises as to what extent the now overused terminology can still be measured against the basic principles and values of the actual purpose and whether the people working in “agile processes” still perceive the terminology as such?

Keywords: agile, Software Development, agile management, agile transformation

INTRODUCTION

The widely used term “agility” is a very popular and frequently used term in a business context, which owes its popularity to the upswing in software development over the last 20 years. Whether agile project management or agile leadership, agility now promises short to long-term success for projects, teams or individual employees in all areas of a company. According to a study by the University of St. Gallen, in which managers from various industries were asked about their assessment of perceived agility in their company. When asked whether there had been an increase in agility in their company, 40% responded with “Agree” and as many as 15% with “Strongly agree”. 30% were neutral, while the remaining 15% disagreed (Lindner 2020). But where does the term “agile” actually come from and how was it originally used? What methods are behind the term and to which organizations or structures can agile working methods be applied? Is “agile” the solution to all organizational problems or is the term used in an inflationary way nowadays and is therefore only perceived by employees as an empty term and no longer used for its intended purpose?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a literature review and examines the origins and current use of agility. It explicitly addresses the issue of the inflationary use of the term and develops the basics for the effective use of the agile method. The discussion is intended to help companies, teams, managers and employees in the selection of agile methods, in their correct use and to create a better understanding of the term “agility”.

RESULTS

Origin of agility

The term “agile” or “agility” originally comes from the Latin and means something like being highly mobile or maneuverable. In the business environment, the term is associated with fast, flexible, step-by-step or not afraid of making mistakes. Due to the upswing in software development, the term has received increasing attention in the last 20 years. The agile way of working was first coined by Talcott Parsons in the 1950s. He defined agile with four skills: Adaptation for adaptability, Goal attainment for the ability not to lose sight of the goal, Integration for the ability to keep agile elements of an organization together and Latency for maintaining the agile concept. On this basis, seventeen software experts developed the “agile manifesto” in 2001. The document for agile working methods, which is still regarded as the basis today, comprises four values and twelve principles (Fischer 2016).

The values

1. individuals and interactions more than processes and tools
2. functioning software more than comprehensive documentation
3. collaboration with the customer more than contract negotiation
4. reacting to change more than following a plan (The Agile Manifesto 2001)

The principles

- a) Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software.
- b) Welcome requirement changes even late in development. Agile processes use change to the customer's competitive advantage.
- c) Deliver working software regularly within a few weeks or months, preferring the shorter timescale.
- d) Subject matter experts and developers must collaborate daily during the project.
- e) Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need and trust them to get the job done.
- f) The most efficient and effective way to communicate information to and within a development team is face-to-face.
- g) Working software is the most important measure of progress.
- h) Agile processes promote sustainable development. Clients, developers and users should be able to maintain a steady pace indefinitely.
- i) Constant attention to technical excellence and good design promotes agility.
- j) Simplicity -- the art of maximizing the amount of work not done -- is essential.
- k) The best architectures, requirements and designs are created by self-organized teams.
- l) At regular intervals, the team reflects on how it can become more effective and adapts its behavior accordingly (The Agile Manifesto 2001).

Agility today

In the meantime, agile methods and agile management have established themselves far beyond the IT sector in the corporate context. According to a study by the Agile Business & IT Collaboration Model 2019, nine out of ten companies from various industries say that they use agile methods in certain areas or teams (IDG Business Media 2019). Agile leadership, agile management or the use of agile methods. The term "agile" is now used in front of many important business terms and the fundamental question arises as to whether the term is now also being used as an inflationary buzzword without actually being realized.

Agile methods

The principle of every agile method is based on the agile manifesto and aims to make teams more flexible and collaborative. Changes or errors should be incorporated or rectified as quickly as possible through short coordination cycles. The best-known agile methods are listed below.

Scrum

Scrum is an agile method in which development teams develop software in so-called sprints in two to four-week cycles. A scrum team consists of around ten members. Short daily coordination meetings ensure maximum transparency within the team and are intended to immediately uncover any errors in the process or development. It is hoped that the short cycles and close coordination will result in a high degree of flexibility and maximum effectiveness (Layton, Morrow 2023, pp. 52–55).

Kanban

Kanban is an agile method that uses a visual approach to process optimization. On a so-called Kanban board (can be analog or digital), task cards are assigned to different columns such as "to do", "in progress" or "done" depending on their current status. Responsibilities are clearly assigned and the focus on the respective lead time of a task from start to completion helps with the continuous improvement process (Anderson 2011, pp. 14–15).

Extreme Programming (XP)

Extreme Programming (XP) is an agile development method that is based on trust and verbal communication and is intended to be highly flexible with very short development cycles with automated tests running in parallel and, by handing over responsibility to each individual employee, should also manage without a real manager (Beck 2003, pp. 16–17).

DevOps

DevOps attempts to combine software development and IT operations. The aim is to deliver higher quality through strong collaboration. In addition, a high degree of automation right from the start should ensure high efficiency. Fast feedback loops and short-term updates ensure a high level of flexibility (Safar 2022).

Design thinking

Design thinking is a methodical approach with the aim of developing user-oriented solutions for complex problems. The problem goes through the 6 phases of design thinking: understanding, observing, defining the problem, brainstorming, developing a prototype and testing. This is intended to promote a high level of creativity and create a strong customer focus (Ehmann 2019, pp. 21–31).

The advantages of agility

The values and principles of the agile manifesto are at the forefront of all agile methods and the advantages of agility can be determined from this. The greatest added value is the high level of flexibility combined with the ability to adapt to short-term changes in requirements or market conditions. The second advantage is the high level of customer orientation, which ensures that customer feedback can be immediately incorporated into the development process. Another advantage is the high level of transparency and communication. This creates a high sense of responsibility both in management and in dealings with each other, and thus also a clear distribution of tasks within the team. The short cycles, such as sprints, also increase productivity. In addition, problems are identified at an early stage and risks of major damage are minimized (Bright Solutions 2024).

Agile – Inflationary use

Unfortunately, the word agile is increasingly being used in an inflationary way in a business context and the meaning of employees is often simply ignored as an empty phrase. Agile leadership, agile development, agile teams or agile working. Managers or companies in particular often use the term in front of various structures or work processes in order to appear more professional or modern. However, if you look behind the scenes and take a look at teams, processes or structures, you quickly realize that the values or principles of agility are often not lived and therefore no real improvement effect is created. As a result, there is a risk that the real benefits that agile methods can bring are no longer recognized by employees or companies, or that the concept itself is not taken seriously (Inselmann 2021). The reasons for the inflationary use of agility are complex, but can be found above all in the attempt by managers and consultants to impose agility on employees or processes (Würzburger 2019).

Basics for correct use

In order to really live agility in a meaningful way and not just overuse the term, decisive factors must be present in a company or a project. First of all, the corporate/project culture must be an open, learning-oriented culture in order to provide a breeding ground for agility. In addition, managers should have the right mindset so that the role of the agile manager can also be properly understood and practiced as a facilitator and supporter. Clear structures must also be created that reflect the company's long-term strategy or the goal of the project (Gerweck 2022). It is also important that everyone involved is clear that agility is not a short-term project savior or a method used for short-term improvement. The use of agility means a long-term commitment that must be accepted by everyone involved. Without creating the right conditions, there is a risk that agility will remain just an empty phrase and employees will turn away from it.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, it can be said that the basis of the agile way of working originates from the software development environment. Many of the values and principles can be easily adapted to other areas of business and life. However, it is very important that the underlying values and principles are actually observed and practiced when using the term “agile”. If the term is used in an inflationary way, there is a risk that the term loses its value and no longer has any meaning for employees or teams. This makes it all the more important to take a critical look at processes, teams or company structures that advertise agility, both from the outside and from the inside, and to constantly question the underlying values and principles. In addition, decision-makers should always consider the overall structure before introducing an agile process. Can agility be implemented in the long term? Does it make sense to implement the activity in agile mode? How can interfaces that do not work in an agile mode be satisfied? Do managers have the right mindset for an agile structure? Looking to the future, it should be noted that the agile working world brings with it all the important components of the modern view of collaboration, leadership and management methods, but runs the risk of losing its effectiveness through inflationary use.

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ГЪВКАВОСТ: СПАСИТЕЛ ИЛИ ИЗТЪРКАНА УПОТРЕБА?

Резюме: В бизнес контекст терминът „гъвкавост“ стана известен най-вече чрез работеща методология в областта на разработването на софтуер. През 2001 г. разработчиците на софтуер разработиха Манифест за гъвкава разработка на софтуер. В него те описват четири ценности и 12 основни принципа за сътрудничество при гъвкаво разработване на софтуер въз основа на схемата AGIL на Талкот Парсънс от 50-те години на миналия век (адаптация, постигане на целта, интеграция, латентност). През последните 20 години разработването на софтуер зае централно място в нашата икономика. В резултат на тази популярност терминът „гъвкав“ се утвърди и като елементарен термин в управлението на проекти, отдели или цели компании извън средата за разработване на софтуер. Много от ценностите и принципите на Манифеста за гъвкавост

вече се прилагат към проекти или процеси в други индустрии и терминът „гъвкав“ се използва в много различни ситуации. Възниква обаче въпросът до каква степен използваната вече прекомерно терминология все още може да се съпостави с основните принципи и ценности на действителната цел и дали хората, работещи в „гъвкави процеси“, все още възприемат терминологията като такава?

Ключови думи: Agile, разработка на софтуер, гъвкаво управление, гъвкава трансформация

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