



Agility in the online space - agile project management and the home office

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Abstract: In the last almost two years, our lives have changed significantly as a result of the pandemic of the coronavirus and the efforts to reduce the spread of the pandemic. We shop online more, we have learned about the pros and cons of digital education, and where it was possible and provided or could be provided, some or all of the workplaces and jobs have introduced, enabled or extended the possibility of teleworking. Our study set out to examine the impact of home office or hybrid working, which has proliferated in the last two years as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, on the increasingly widespread use of agile project management, including continuous contact and face-to-face communication, which has emerged from the world of software development and promises flexibility, responsiveness and effective change management. In order to understand the relationship and the impact of agile and the home office on each other, we conducted primary research through in-depth interviews with managers and experts involved in the field, to learn about their experiences, opinions and insights. In addition to presenting the principles and values of the agile approach and summarising its essence, we would like to present the results of this research.

Keywords: agility, project management, online space, home office

1 Introduction

The last two years have brought significant changes to our lives: the pandemic of the coronavirus and the measures and regulations it has brought have had a profound impact on our daily lives. Measures taken to slow the spread of the epidemic, such as curfews, opening hours in restaurants and suggestions for fewer face-to-face meetings, have reduced the time we spend in the community, and the regulations on shops have changed the way many people shop. However, a new era has also begun for work, as the reduction in face-to-face meetings in the workplace has also brought about changes. Where it was possible, and where it was provided



or could be provided, teleworking was introduced, enabled or extended. As a result, the number of workers who continued to work from home, in the home office, increased dramatically in just a few weeks. Some workplaces have switched to this form of working (almost) entirely, but perhaps even more so is the so-called hybrid solution: some workers work at their workplace, others work in parallel from home, and may take turns at certain intervals. This solution can reduce the number of face-to-face contacts while maintaining a lower level of attendance.

Of course, the use and feasibility of home office or hybrid working depends to a large extent on the activity carried out and the availability and feasibility of the technical conditions. There are some jobs and occupations (e.g. drivers, postmen) which, by their very nature, do not allow teleworking. But what about those organisations and projects where the agile approach and its methods, based on continuous, face-to-face communication, have become more widespread in recent years? How compatible is this with home office working? To what extent can agile methodologies be applied in such circumstances, when the possibilities for face-to-face collaboration are limited?

Our study aims to investigate the co-operability of agile project management and home office or hybrid working. To understand this, we conduct primary research and explore this through in-depth interviews. Before presenting the main results of this, we will use relevant literature to illustrate the principles and essence of the agile approach.

2 Agile project management

The true birth of the Agile approach to project management is often associated with the February 2001 Agile Manifesto, in which leading software development professionals summarised the four core values of the Agile approach. These are that personal communication between individuals is more important than the methods and tools used; working software is more important than detailed documentation; working with the customer is more important than contract negotiation; and effective change management is more important than full adherence to plans (Beck et al. 2001). However, as Špundak (2014) points out, the emphasis on the more important elements, the core values, does not mean that those that are opposed to them are entirely dispensable or unnecessary, but that they are de-emphasised.

The four core values are detailed in the Agile Manifesto in twelve principles: they are: delivering valuable software, change management, frequent delivery, continuous communication, motivated team members and trust between them, personal communication, progress, sustainable improvement, technical excellence, simplicity, self-organising team and frequent fine-tuning (Beck et al. 2001).



These four values and twelve principles summarise the essence of agility. These characteristics help to identify what can be considered agile, and from these can be derived the various agile approaches, techniques and methods used. In the twenty years since the Manifesto was first drafted, a number of books have been published on these (Chin, 2004; Wysocki, 2007; Cohen, 2010; Cobb, 2011).

But what are the advantages and strengths of adopting an agile approach? According to DeCarlo (2004), the most important characteristic is adaptability, which is much more important than the predictability that is part of the traditional approach. As Špundak (2014) puts it, agility is actually the ability to balance flexibility and stability.

The major differences between the traditional (waterfall) and the agile approach are summarised in Table 1 below, based on some aspects.

Table 1: Key differences between traditional (waterfall) and agile approaches

Aspect, characteristic	Waterfall	Agile
Requirements	are clear from the start	changing during the process
Customer involvement	Not involved in development	Close and frequent collaboration
Documentation	detailed requirements	technical knowledge is much more important
Project size	larger	smaller
Team members	not focused, fluctuate	smaller, assembled teams
System failure	means serious consequences	less critical, manageable
Project plan	linear	complex
Key strengths	predictability	adaptability

Source: DeCarlo, 2004 and Špundak, 2014 based on own editing

3 Agile project management and the home office

3.1 The meaning of agility

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and opinions on the impact of home office and hybrid working systems on the use of agile



methodologies, which have been widely adopted as a result of the pandemic, primary research was conducted through in-depth interviews. In total, eleven managers with significant experience in project management and experts in the field were interviewed in spring 2021.

We chose qualitative research and in-depth interviews as the research method because we felt it was important to be able to ask the selected individuals questions personally, and to map their feelings and attitudes by seeing their reactions. In addition, the advantage of the in-depth interview is that it allows the subjects to answer the questions in their own words, to express their thoughts, to explain in detail their views on the topic, and thus to get a more accurate picture of their opinions and to know them better. In addition, the discussion may also bring to the fore other perspectives not previously expressed. In doing so, we followed the example of Suomalainen (2015), Srivastava and Jain (2017) and Kamei et al. (2017), who also used in-depth interviews to explore the agile approach and its application.

The topic, background and purpose of the in-depth interview were communicated to the participants during the first approach. A semi-structured interview outline provided the framework and the main direction of the interviews. The responses received were assessed using a traditional content analysis method.

The subjects of the in-depth interviews were agreed to be completely anonymous, so in order to respect this, they are referred to without their names when referring to their responses, and are mentioned or distinguished by their job or role where appropriate. Of the eleven professionals surveyed, nine work in the electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning, finance, insurance and information and communication sectors, and two did not wish to be named. Six of the interviewees are managers of some kind (technical, IT, project or general manager), two are agile coaches and one person works as a project manager, consultant or enterprise architect.

3.2 Perception of agility

The first thing we wanted to find out about agility was the general opinion of the interviewees, how they view it and what their perception of it is. In order to find out, we first asked the interviewees to briefly describe in a few words what agility means to them. The most frequently mentioned terms in the responses (mentioned by almost all interviewees) were clearly, and not surprisingly, flexibility and agility. Other terms mentioned are summarised in Figure 1 below.

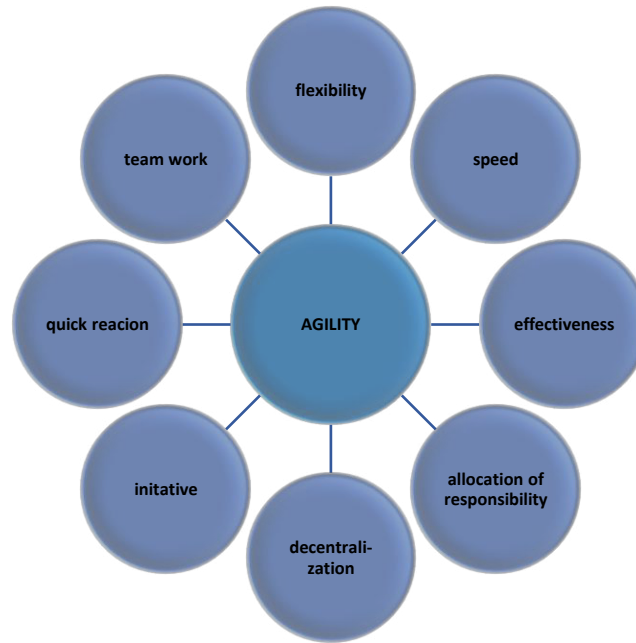


Figure 1: Terms first mentioned in relation to agility
(source: own editing)

One of the agile coaches elaborated on this point: "agility is first of all a mindset, and only then a tool or framework. It is about delivering the best solutions, both at the operational level (things related to actual delivery) and at the meta level (building and optimising collaboration and performance)". According to another agile coach in the research, "agile is a set of meaningful processes built around goals and values".

In our opinion, the responses received can be divided into three main groups:

- terms and attributes considered as prerequisites for agile functioning (e.g. teamwork, decentralisation, allocation of responsibility);
- the consequences of agility (e.g. flexibility, speed, efficiency);
- terms referring to a complex approach and way of thinking (e.g. mindset, set of rational processes).



3.3 Agile methodology in home office - just a constraint or does it really work?

In the next part of the interviews, we turned to the main question of our research: we wanted to know whether the interviewees think that the agile approach works in the home office system, whether they have experienced that agile methodologies can be applied in such circumstances, when the possibilities for personal collaboration are limited?

To investigate this, we first asked whether, in the interviewees' experience, the introduction of teleworking (in whole or in part) had necessitated changes in the application of agile methodologies. The responses reflected the fact that there was no particular need for direct or imposed changes among the interviewees in this respect. According to one agile coach, no changes had been made in the methodologies, but changes in the tools - adapted to the online space - had been made. It was added that there were cases where the new system had evolved naturally as a result of changed circumstances. The other agile coach underlined that in his opinion and experience, the importance of the coach's competences was particularly heightened during this period and in these circumstances.

We were also curious to know what the interviewees considered to be the most difficult aspects of the transition to the home office system. Some mentioned the transition to fully online communication: in their experience, many found it difficult to get used to this way of communicating and needed more time to get it running smoothly. This was particularly true for those who were completely new to this way of conducting meetings and discussions. The IT manager's view is that where agile is well organised, there is no problem in switching to teleworking. In addition to this, there were those who stressed that even if home office and agile project management could work together, this situation could make many people aware of the human aspect of the importance of personal relationships.

When working in a home office system, there are some digital tools that are essential for working: a laptop or tablet, or software and interfaces for online communication. We asked what tools and methods, in addition to these, support agile working in a home office. The IT manager pointed out that in such circumstances, it is even more important to have a continuous and accurate tracking of tasks, which requires a proper tracking and accounting system, as it is more difficult to monitor whether the employee is working as expected and actively. In addition, specifically related to the use of agile methodologies, the importance of trained agile coaches to help teams find their best solutions, whatever the circumstances, was also mentioned here.

As shown in Figure 2, respondents highlighted flexibility, openness, punctuality, trust, responsibility, focus, activity and proactivity as key factors for a successful transition to home office working and for working effectively in such circumstances, as well as the ability to work independently and the importance of teamwork.

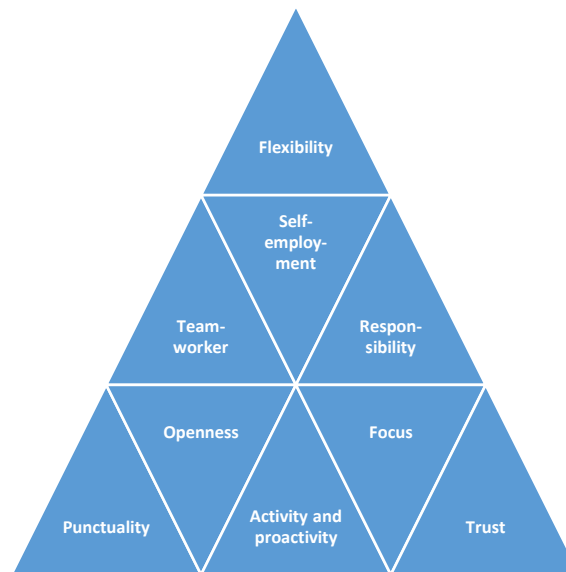


Figure 2: Competences required to run a home office according to agile methodologies according to interviewees
(source: own editing)

4 Summary

Based on the interviewees' responses to the interviews, we conclude that the key values and pillars of agility, personal communication and continuous contact through digital solutions, are not compromised when colleagues work in a remote home office environment. Nevertheless, according to the opinions and experiences of the interviewees, although there were some initial difficulties, in the long run, working under the agile methodology was not negatively affected by the home office or hybrid working system. Thus, overall, the managers and experts interviewed during the in-depth interviews unanimously attested that agility and agile project management works in the online space.



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