Five criteria to establish if an organisation stands to profit from implementing Agile

Agile is Changing the World of Project Management

Summary: *The nightmare of any project manager is a vague and hazy description of a project's desired deliverables. As early as possible a project manager needs a precise list of all project requirements to ensure feasible planning. Because of this difficulty more and more businesses turn to Agile. Its essential advantage is that project managers can dispense with a "100% detailed plan". Teams delve right into the work and cooperate very closely with the client, discussing progress and next steps at short intervals. Agile expert Verena Evers introduces five criteria which help a company determine if an Agile approach would be a good fit for their projects.*

The executive management team of a medium-sized mechanical engineering company mandated an organisational change project. The challenge for the project team was the fact that the new structure would only emerge as the project unfolded. Executive management wanted to specify their requirements as the project took shape. In essence the project manager was asked to square the circle. How could he plan his project professionally without knowing the project's exact deliverables? However, he had an idea. "We will try this with Agile", he proposed. Now the project does not need to be planned in every detail in advance as usual. Instead work is kicked of right away and at short intervals the work is presented to and coordinated with the client. This is the route this project team took: The project team tested different newly-developed processes in small "trial teams". The results were discussed with the CEO. "Based on the feedback from staff and executive management we work our way towards the best possible structure step by little step," explained the project manager.

Agile has become a mega trend in project management. Teams work in short development sprints. They work towards the project outcome in a hands-on, iterative process coordinating each step with the client: Is each iteration leading towards fulfilling client expectations? Can the team proceed based on the last iteration? How does the last iteration need to be adapted in order to continue with the next sprint?

„In classic project management projects are planned into every little detail", explains Verena Evers, project management expert at next level consulting. Taking several weeks and painstaking attention to detail project managers determine objectives and deliverables, calculate time lines and budgets, weigh risks and identify staff requirements. For this to succeed the project manager needs to know early on what it is the client wants. Such a tightly planned project offers little wriggle room for changes. "Agile offers an elegant solution to this problem", explains Verena Evers.

However, new approaches in project management also demand changes in the way we work in projects – and in organisations as a whole. "If companies can handle these changes Agile often works better than classic project management approaches", says Verena Evers. With the introduction of Agile it is not unusual for productivity to be raised by 200% and more. This is something Verena Evers has experienced repeatedly in her work with her clients.

The following five criteria can help organisations determine, if they stand to profit from introducing Agile:

First Criterion: Dynamic Projects

If clients cannot formulate their wishes and requirements at the outset of a project Agile can offer the only successful way forward. "This is often true for highly innovative

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projects, which venture into new territories and need a creative approach", explains Verena Evers. Also for complex projects for which plans need to be adapted repeatedly, Agile promises success. The rule of thumb here is that the more changes are to be expected after the project kicks off the better bet Agile becomes.

Second Criterion: Being Open to Transparency

There is nowhere to hide within an Agile project. The current status of the project, technical difficulties, blocks to progress and falling behind schedule – all these details are known to the whole team. Experts say that Agile projects are "fully illuminated", there are no dark corners. It becomes very clear very quickly who or what is holding back the team. Organisations with an open culture – or which aim for an open culture - welcome this kind of transparency. "The better a company deals with transparency the more successful Agile becomes", explains Verena Evers.

Third Criterio: Breaking up Silos

In classic project management a project is often handed from department to department, for example from software development to software testing to production. This is different for Agile. This cumbersome "handing over" of projects becomes a thing of the past, Agile breaks with customary organisational logic, with departments and silo-thinking. "Development engineers, test specialists and production experts do not work on a project one after the other, but together as one team", says Verena Evers. This means that companies who have an affinity towards cross-functional team work, are well prepared for Agile.

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Fourth Criterion: Pass Responsibility on into the Teams

What is striking about Agile projects are the small number of planning documents and the few reports. This does not mean that teams are unsupervised. But team management functions differently – not through plans and KPIs but through regular meetings with the clients in which results are presented and discussed. This total focus on results gives very short reign to the teams. Each iteration presented to the client must be self-contained, functional, tested and documented – like a functional software module or a stand-alone mechanical prototype. This faces manages with the following challenge: They cannot control a project's progress with their tried and trusted tools. Writing reports, gathering data and comparing actual data with plans is no longer possible. In other words organisations which are comfortable with trying new ways of managing and leading will benefit from Agile.

Fifth Criterion: Willingness to Change

Agile project management implies new ways of working. Teams work independently, they decide for themselves how to move forward and how to organise themselves. They do not need a classic project manager, who steers the project like a captain steers a ship. In the same way tasks and responsibilities change for other "players". They will discover new roles for themselves. Here is the example of the Agile project manager: Some become the face of the project to all contacts outside the team, they take care of relationship management with clients and partners. Others see themselves as coaches, they advise and facilitate the team organising itself and serve as mediators in cases of conflict. "If organisations are open to these kind of changes and if they can adapt their mindset, chances are high for a successful introduction of Agile", says Verena Evers.

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