

Agile and / or projects: Are projects in the Agile world possible?

A bit strange title, because what does this suggest? Is there a contradiction or not, or can it work together?

In the Agile world the word 'project' has been banned and 'project managers' would no longer be necessary. In the Agile world the word 'project' no longer occurs. We talk about 'traditional projects' at meetings, in which one can call various characteristics of Waterfall projects.

On the other hand, you can follow Agile Project Management courses and read books about them. In the courses and meetings, Waterfall projects are compared with Agile projects.

The confusion sometimes seems complete. Or we just mean something different when we use words like agile and projects.

Agile, project and project management are in my opinion buzz words, they are used with implicit meaning and associations. Here I make an effort to make that more explicit.

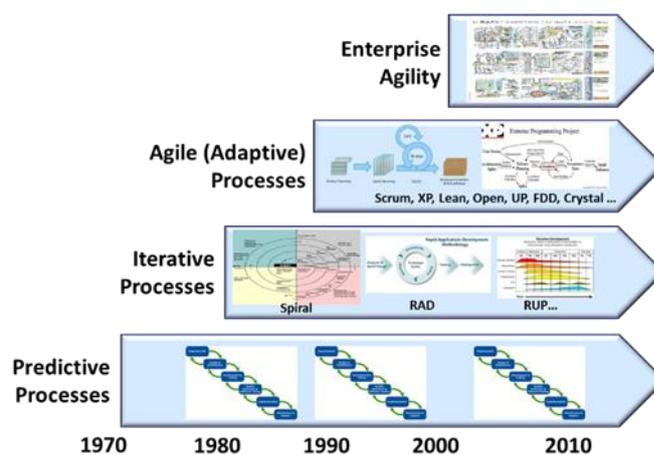
I use the following perspectives for this:

1. The nature of a change that must be realized.
2. The product flow or method that describes which activities should be carried out in which order according to a chosen model.
3. The mindset or work culture with the organizational form or structure.
4. The unity of change and its control.
5. The system and organization of the decision-making of all decisions that have to be taken during a change cycle.

1. The nature of a change that must be realized.

Is the change 'one-off', one-time-right and with a clearly specified "project" final goal or is the change fluid, repetitive or evolutionary with an unclear "agile" final goal. (Although the iterations or evolution steps in the agile world are also inevitably one-off, you do not build the same thing twice.) And of course every variant somewhere in between. Based on this, you choose a framework with an activity schedule, a work culture and organization, a control approach and a decision-making organization, which suits the nature of the change.

The social and technological change ensured that the frameworks evolved, as shown in the diagram below (thanks to Harry).

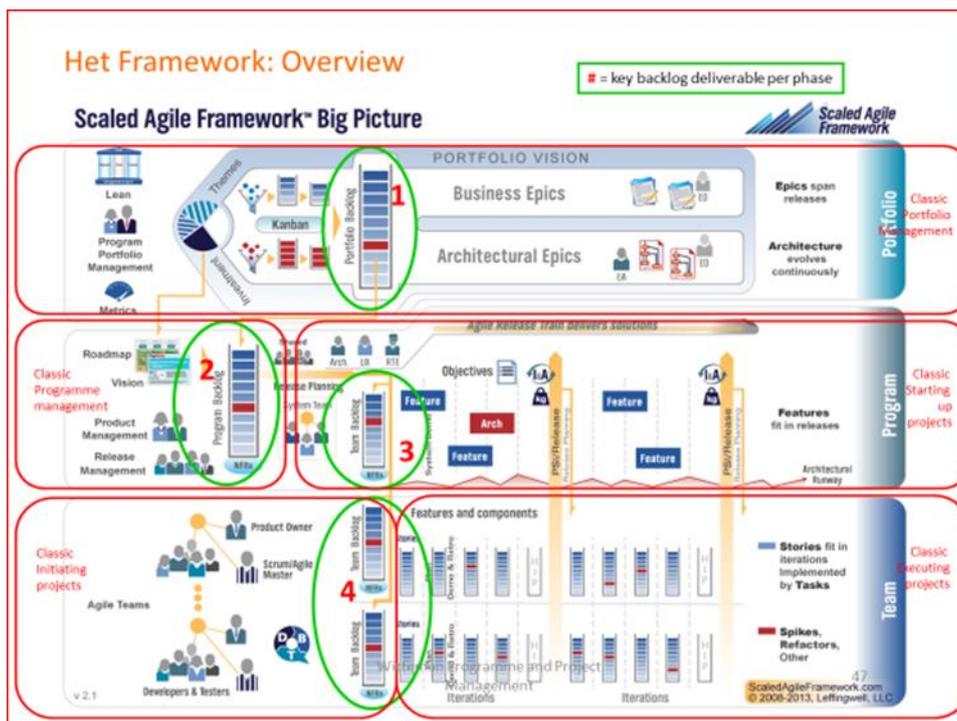


And, depending on the nature of change and situation and the state of the organization, mixed forms can arise, because the right approach is that approach that meets the nature and circumstances of the change.

So when someone says 'we do not do any more projects', he may mean that the changes are evolutionary and adaptive and we have to work briefly cyclically in order to always be able to respond to changing demands and specifications, we will no longer attempt to specify everything in advance and to make big pieces. But if you use the pure definition of the term project, a one-off delineated change, you can also call a sprint or a product increment a 'project', but you run the risk of being allergic to it.

2. The productflow or method

The product flow or method describes which activities should be carried out in which order according to a chosen model. There are now many product flow frameworks both in the corner of waterfall ('project') as in the corner of adaptive ('agile'). Als je de methodes van waterfall (bv SDM) en agile (bv SAFe) over elkaar heen zou leggen (zie plaatje hieronder), dan kun je zien, dat op een bepaald abstractie niveau ze hetzelfde doen. If you lay over each other the methods of waterfall (eg SDM) and agile (eg SAFe) (see picture below), you can see that at a certain level of abstraction they do the same thing.

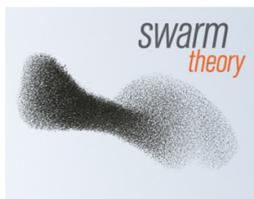


But the number of intermediates and the way in which the intermediates come into being, how we call them and how they are recorded, there are the big differences.

So if someone says 'we do not do any more projects', then he means possible, we will not specify everything in detail and document it, but in our activities we focus on getting software working and do not get lost in documentation and specifications. The word 'project' has nothing to do with this, it only tells us something about the working method that is being used.

3. De mindset or work culture with the organizational form or structure.

A change can be brought about by people in many ways, choosing an organizational form and structure and implementing a culture on how one interacts with each other and what one expects from each other. For the work culture one can set the directive, hierarchical control ('project'-culture) against self-management, giving individuals and teams the space to take responsibility for their contribution to the result to be achieved (' agile 'culture). This 'agile' work culture is similar to that of self-managing teams and is in my opinion well summarized in the RSA video [“The surprising truth about what motivates us”](#), in which AUTHONOMY, MASTERY AND PURPOSE are identified as the 3 motivators and this culture is also comparable with the phenomenon 'swarm intelligence', see picture for summary.



The logics behind swarm intelligence (Edwin de Bree)

- Who knows can tell. ***Leadership is not a function or position, but a role.*** Dependent on situation, leadership role is executed by most competent in the group.
- Two know more than one. All decisions are group decisions. Make use of diversity.
- Keep it simple. Complex circumstances demands simple solutions.
- Clear norms and values. Clear values and (a small number) of norms are the best navigation tools in a complex environment.
- Autonomy. Free interaction between group members. Freedom of choice and action without coercion.
- Accessible information for everyone.
- ***Shared ambition and shared interest.*** What's purpose of this group. What's reason to be together.
- Own responsibility. Accept consequences own choices.

But in addition to working culture, choices can also be made with regard to organizational form of who does the work, in which context and who performs which tasks. Here we come across the opposition of line vs 'project'. If the line carries out the work, there is a continuous occupation where the work is brought to and at 'project' there is a temporary organization that carries out the work, but practice shows that there are infinite number of mixed forms. It is just where there is a need for, if in operation where working according to an 'agile' working method is a peak in workload, then you sometimes see temporary organizations or teams, although one will not quickly refer to that as 'project'.

Finally, the roles and functions, who do what and which competencies we combine in functions. I limit myself here to the role or function of project manager / manager. In a role you do the number of tasks that suit the responsibility given to that role, in a position you have skills and skills to perform certain tasks. In the world of 'agile and / or projects' the question remains as to who and how we manage the change, so the tasks that had a project leader in the 'projects' world, we find in the 'agile' world with other roll carriers and / or officers and they also do this in the way that suits the chosen work culture and organization.

So when someone says 'we do not do any more projects', then he means possible, we work with self-managing teams, without direct management and no longer know any functionaries with title project manager. But the responsibilities and tasks of 'project managers' will now, with a different style, be found with other bearers and officers.

4. The unity of change and its control.

We give a name to each change or part of it, and it is called the project, release, program, system, sprint, product increment, agile release train, iteration, etc. But with every unit of change there are wishes and requirements with regard to control and a way how we think we can achieve that control. The most common control parameters are scope, time, money (resources) and quality and they are controlled depending on your control objective. In the agile world, one chooses fixed values with regard to time (every so many days a sprint and every so many days a PI i.e.) and money (permanent staffing) and at minimum level quality the scope varies. But even then, situations occur that scope has a certain deadline, such as legal obligations, then there is indeed also a fixed scope at a given time. The execution of the control does not take place on the basis of detailed agreements or plans, but 'agile' through interaction and self-management of the teams involved with little documentation. With the waterfall-like methods the scope is basically fixed and one tries to realize that 'project' within time and money and via exception steering one adjusts one of the control parameters if it does not turn out to be as planned. The execution of the control takes place on the basis of detailed plans and agreements.

So if someone says we have no 'project control' anymore, he may mean that the basic principle in control is variety in scope with a continuous learning organization, but there can still be a fixed goal, which is also the name 'project goal' could give and achieving that goal is still tightly monitored.

5. The system and organization of the decision-making of all decisions that have to be taken during a change cycle.

No matter how a change is handled decisions must always be taken and the key questions remain relevant: do we do the right things, do we do them well, do we make progress and do we achieve the objectives and benefits. But how the decisions take and how we organize it can be very different. If we do this in discrete steps with detailed documentation, this is often referred to as 'project' decision making, but in the 'agile' world it is much more a continuous flow with rolling planning character. The key elements in decision-making in the classic 'project' world are, if it is good, also visible in the decision making in the 'agile' world, but presented in a different way and rhythm. See picture for display key elements in both worlds.

Classic governance Document	Key content	Business Value Rolling Document	Key content
Programme mandate	Justification start programme	Business Value document should be a rolling planning document with quarterly update all backlogs and continuous updated benefits management plan and continuous updated business case	Investment theme with EPIC description as part of Portfolio backlog
Programme brief	Business and solution roadmap		Programme backlog with HL Features and solution roadmap
Programme initiation	Business, Solution and Delivery roadmap	in order to update	HL Release Trains with Features Team backlogs
Project mandate	Justification start project		Start specific HL Feature release train
Project brief	Project EZE solution	1. Reserved budget for programme 2. Approved budgets for to be started HL Feature release trains and 3. Released budget for delivering releases 4. Overall spent budget	Release train solution with Features backlogs
Project initiation	Delivery plan		Prioritized User stories backlogs
End report	Readiness using solution		Readiness using delivered releases
Benefits Management report	Tracked foreseen benefits and business case result		Tracked foreseen benefits and business case result

So if someone says we do not take 'project' decisions anymore, he means possible, we take the decisions continuously in the flow of the release trains and sprints, but you should always find the key elements again.

Finally

Our question at the beginning 'Agile and or Projects' can only be answered if we are clear about what we mean by the terms used and what associations we have. The attempt in this writing to clarify this via number of perspectives can be summarized as follows.

	'project'	in between	'agile'
Nature of change	one time right		adapatief 'We need to deliver software so fast, that our customers don't have time to change their minds!'
Product flow /method	Specified, waterfall		Short cycled Working software over comprehensive documentation
Mindset /attitude	directive		Self managed Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
Control of change unity	detailed and complete plan		scope is variable Responding to change over following a plan
Decision making	discrete		continuous Customer collaboration over contract negotiation

What fits the situation?

The movement towards agile in managing and implementing changes is a logical and justified evolutionary step given the social and technological developments. But depending on the situation and circumstances, many choices are possible: what fits, where should the emphasis be, or which combination is desirable. And with each transition to a different approach as this one is, it is good to take the following warnings into account.

We tried hard . . . but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be reorganized . . . I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency, and demoralization.

—Petronius Arbiter, 210 B.C.

An improvement in one direction initiate costs in another direction

-Gerald M.Weinberg

Paul PM Witteman