

Getting Through the Agile Maze

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Abstract

Agile project and programme management methods, once the preserve of software development teams, are increasingly popular with organisations that need to be flexible and responsive as the pace of change continues to accelerate in business. Against a backdrop of recent changes in certification options for agile practitioners, however, there is growing confusion about which approach represents Best Practice and which certifications are of most value.

Getting through the agile maze

Agile methodologies have taken the project management world by storm. No longer confined to software development, the agile approach is popular with organisations that need to be flexible and responsive as the pace of change continues to accelerate in business. Against a backdrop of the increasing popularity of agile, however, there is growing confusion about which approach represents Best Practice and which certifications are of most value.

Since the Agile Manifesto was first published in 2001 there have been a number of incarnations of the approach. Essentially, the iterative and incremental nature of agile allows organisations to keep their eyes on the prize – the product or services they are looking to launch – while allowing development teams to adapt their approach as they go. Typically two-to-four week ‘sprint’ work cycles, culminating in a review of progress made so far before the next phase of development, contrast sharply with timescales for traditional project management that stretched into months and even years. Frequently this resulted in the end product being obsolete before it was ready.

Growing popularity of agile

In a recent Benchmark Report based on a survey of 2,000 project managers confirmed the growing popularity of agile. In 2015 25% of the respondents indicated that they use agile methods and techniques in their day-to-day roles, while 60% have some exposure to agile and only 15% indicated no exposure. This is a 10% increase from the response provided by UK-based practitioners 12 months previously.

Agile started life as software development’s baby and still has the highest usage rates in that sector compared with any other – 65% of software developers responding to the survey use agile day to day. However, the retail and government sectors also now indicate strong rates of daily usage (34% and 31%).

As agile grows in popularity, both organisations and individuals are increasingly keen to develop their skills and knowledge in the methodology and ideally achieve certification that they have reached a good standard. Yet just 12% of the UK-based practitioners say that they have some form of accreditation, mostly variants of Scrum.

AgilePM or PRINCE2 Agile?

There are two main options for organisations and individuals looking for formal agile development and accreditation. APMG-International AgilePM® Foundation and Practitioner training or certification, based on the DSDM Agile Project Management Framework, aims to 'provide the ability to deliver agile projects in organisations requiring standards, rigour and visibility around project management, while at the same time enabling the fast pace, change and empowerment provided by AgilePM'. Until recently this was the go-to certification for agile.

In June, AXELOS launched PRINCE2 Agile™, with the aim of combining the best of the PRINCE2 and agile approaches. AXELOS is a joint venture set up in 2014 by the UK government and Capita, to develop, manage and operate qualifications in best practice, in methodologies formerly owned by the Office of Government Commerce (OGC). But many organisations and individuals are unclear about what PRINCE2 Agile offers that is not covered by AgilePM or how PRINCE2 Agile can possibly combine methodologies previously viewed as very disparate.

Of course many other agile training courses and 'certifications' are available, involving a wide range of techniques and taught in a variety of ways including very short courses with no assessment. PRINCE2 Agile and Agile Project Management Foundation and Practitioner certification both offer organisations and individuals a credible qualification – obtained by passing an independently validated test that it is possible to fail. So, organisations and individuals alike are facing a real dilemma as to which of the two types of agile-flavoured training is best suited to their specific needs.

In fact, for some this decision is a no-brainer. PRINCE2 Agile is intended to be an incremental module for organisations that have previous exposure to PRINCE2. If that is not the case, PRINCE2 Agile is unlikely to be suitable. Or perhaps PRINCE2 has worked well as a method of organising projects but the end result has not always met organisational objectives. If this is happening repeatedly, PRINCE2 Agile should enable them to improve the delivery aspect of their projects.

AgilePM is ideal when organisations are starting to feel the need for more structure and governance to support their existing agile approach. As agile organisations mature, they tend to build a project management "wrapper" around their practices. For example if you are thinking about creating a "scrum of scrums" then look at AgilePM as it is proven to bring the desired control which the "scrum of scrums" cannot. "Scrum of scrums" improves communication not control.

Factors outside of key project management considerations can also come into play when assessing the optimum agile certification route. If the organisation is seeing a high level of staff turnover and regular team change, there is unlikely to be enough team cohesion to adopt a truly agile approach. In this case, PRINCE2 Agile would offer the formalised structure needed for new teams. Conversely, where there is a stable agile team, AgilePM works well.

Organisations who have found themselves taking an agile approach organically might begin to encounter difficulty in getting senior level buy-in to projects that lack well-defined timelines or budgets. As the business grows and becomes more complex, stakeholders might feel agile does not give them to control they need and does not reflect the daily reality of increasingly interdependent processes. If these organisations perceive the PRINCE2 methodology as rigid (on the contrary it's not, but some applications have led to that perception), AgilePM can be an effective way of introducing governance without restricting the agile approach to fast and flexible development.

Project management as a discipline has been around since the 60's, but has lacked a definitive career ladder, and it is common for individual project and programme managers to organise and even pay for their own training and development in order to manage their own career progression. For project and programme managers who have already undergone PRINCE2 training, PRINCE2 Agile may seem to be a natural progression. However, each individual has to make his or her own assessment as to which certification renders them more saleable in their target sectors or works best with their current or potential employers' cultures and ways of working.

Finally, individuals need to consider which qualification would influence their future employment prospects, PRINCE2 is respected and recognised throughout the world, and both APM and PMI acknowledge the benefits PRINCE2 brings to their respective bodies of knowledge. AgilePM tends to be better recognised (currently) in the UK and Europe and is growing in respect as more mature agile focussed organisations recognise the need for improved project control, particularly when the wider business changes are considered.

Protecting investment

Organisations and individuals who have already invested hard cash in agile training and certification will naturally be looking to protect their investment and will be hoping that money already spent on training has not been wasted. The good news is that as PRINCE2 Agile is part of the AXELOS Best Practice portfolio, alongside its project and programme management products and the ITIL® service management standard, it builds on any previous training. Both PRINCE2 Agile and AgilePM are complementary to the entire AXELOS stable, including Managing Successful Programmes (MSP®), Management of Portfolios (MoP®) and Portfolio, Programme and Project Offices (P3O®) qualifications.

AgilePM certification is available at both Foundation and Practitioner levels and both PRINCE2 Agile and AgilePM feature elements that cover creating the business case and managing end-to-end control of projects or programmes. In order to navigate to the most

appropriate approach to agile Best Practice organisations must ask themselves and their senior stakeholders some searching questions about the nature of the business, how it is really operating day to day and what it needs to do to improve that. The next step is to evaluate the organisation's knowledge and understanding of PRINCE2 and agile methods, to ensure that decisions about the organisation's future agile direction are based on a clear understanding of the options and not on widely held but mistaken assumptions about the different approaches. Only then will the organisation be ready to steer a course to agile project and programme management.

References

¹Project Management Benchmark Report 2015.

<http://www.arraspeople.co.uk/assets/ckeditor/ckfinder/userfiles/files/BenchmarkReport/ProjectManagementBenchmarkReport2015.pdf>

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