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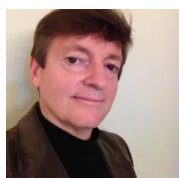
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Why Agile doesn't work for most IT pros: The bigger you are, the harder you fall

While Agile's more open and collaborative approach doesn't scale easily to larger organizations, it remains the best bet for taking businesses of all sizes forward into an uncertain future.

Written by **Joe McKendrick,** Contributing Writer

Jan. 22, 2024 at 11:05 a.m. PT

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We're still a ways off from fully realizing the vision of the well-regarded Agile Manifesto -- which outlined and encouraged the practice of working closely and informally with end users to iteratively build software. There was only one catch with this more open and collaborative approach -- it didn't scale easily to larger organizations with multiple sites, systems, and teams working across the globe.

The issue of scale still inhibits large or growing organizations. Small organizations represented in a recent survey of 758 software pros conducted by Digital.ai report strong business benefits, while their larger counterparts keep running into roadblocks.

Users who are happy with Agile point to benefits such as improved collaboration (60%), while 57% saw better alignment to business needs and a quarter saw better quality software delivered.

Overall, while more than seven in 10 IT professionals -- 71% -- use Agile in software development, only 11% are fully satisfied with the outcomes, while 33% are "somewhat satisfied." That means at least 56% are not happy with the outcomes, or may not be aware of results.

Close to half, 46%, blame "too many mixed systems" in their companies for forcing them to adopt hybrid approaches to software development. Other challenges included siloed teams and resultant delays at 37%, while 34% said culture clash, inconsistent use across teams (30%), and inability to measure business value (28%).

AI is starting to work its way into Agile activities. Among Agile users, almost 30% are actively exploring employing large language models (LLMs) and code assistants to assist in development processes.

Agile's offspring, DevOps, is also on the table. Both are intended to increase end-to-end visibility and the ability to measure cycle times, wait times, and bottlenecks. Other areas in progress include continuous testing done earlier in the life cycle (29%), along with LLMs (10%) and code assist (10%).

Many issues with Agile result from size -- mixed software development approaches, organizational resistance to change, lack of understanding among leaders, and internal silos, which are hallmarks of large, multi-departmental organizations. As a result, most successful Agile implementations are found in small companies. A majority of professionals in smaller organizations, 52%, believe Agile is a "powerful productivity and organizational framework resulting in increased collaboration, improved software quality, and better alignment with the business." Only 43% of professionals with larger companies agree.

Close to three-fourths of professionals with small companies (74%) -- versus 62% at large companies -- said a majority of their applications were delivered on time and "with quality," In addition, 71% of small organizations -- compared to 53% at large companies -- have "complete visibility into what's being developed and delivered across the software development lifecycle."

In addition, 61% of small-company respondents have product managers who can oversee the entire pipeline and measure value to the business -- compared with just 43% of large companies.

This is the 17th year this study was fielded. One may be forgiven for seeing the original Agile Manifesto, written in 2001, as dated. Heads-down coding from scratch is vanishing. Over the past two decades, we've seen the onset of cloud, digital transformation, edge computing, remote work, artificial intelligence, and business leaders leaning even harder on their technology teams to take them into the future. The lines between technology and business have blurred or even disappeared altogether. Technology professionals have become business movers and shakers, and businesspeople are growing more tech-savvy,

Agile team leaders are being asked to do a lot, the survey's authors state -- "from demonstrating business value and enabling digital transformation to incorporating AI and managing distributed workforces. From AI to developer burnout, hybrid work environments and unrelenting demand, change is happening in every organization in every industry. At this moment in time, it feels like Agile is having difficulty adapting."

Still, the Agile philosophy remains the best bet for taking businesses forward into an uncertain future, dominated by technology. Scrum continues to be the most popular team-level methodology, employed at 63% of sites. The Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) remains the top choice at the enterprise level at 26%, but 22% said they don't follow a mandated enterprise framework at all.

The benefits of Agile -- improved collaboration and better alignment with the business -- are still out of reach. A challenge cited by 37% is business teams simply don't understand what Agile is or what it can do. Another 27% said there is not enough training. "There is an ongoing disconnect between agile practitioners and the business, evidenced by resistance to organizational change, a lack of understanding amongst leadership, and inadequate training and support from the business side," the survey's authors report.

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