

Yes, Project Managers Exist in an Agile World



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The transition from Waterfall to Agile has resulted in significant changes in the IT workplace. There have been deep impacts across organizational structures that once used traditional Project Management methods, including to roles, methods, practices and even the structure and administration of IT portfolios. Today, even the most traditional enterprises are shifting their focus from Projects to Products. This shift leads to a fundamental question – can Project Managers exist in an Agile world? And if so, how?

WATERFALL VS AGILE ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Traditional Waterfall projects are timebound endeavors aimed at producing well-defined deliverables on budget and according to plan. The roles and responsibilities of the Project Manager were naturally designed to lead the successful execution of the predetermined plan. With today's environment characterized by rapidly changing user needs and market conditions, time-bound, plan driven projects often fail to achieve business objectives.

Agile practices, which enable teams to rapidly adapt and adjust to changing business needs, have now been widely adopted. Agile teams work iteratively in short Sprints, rather than long plans, and deliver value through cross-functional specialists in roles such as Product Owner, Scrum Master, Release Train Engineers (RTEs) and Development Team members.

This raises questions about the role of a Project Manager in a team or, in the case of larger implementations, in a program. The Project Manager role is not mentioned in the Scrum guide, which has sparked debate about the current state and future of this role in the IT workplace.

WILL THERE BE A NEED FOR PROJECT MANAGERS IN THE FUTURE?

Many organizations are dealing with this question as they convert their processes and people from traditional Project Management into Agile, Product-focused teams. The role of Project Managers in Agile can be a contentious issue. Some believe you cannot go from Project Management to Agility and that there are certain projects, especially in the public space, which have so many rules, fragmentation and rigorous requirements, that they cannot be done with Agile. So, what exactly will the Project Manager role look like in the future?

We conducted a survey of the Project Management and IT community to ask their thoughts.



Collectively, the survey shows that most respondents believe that there will always be a need for Project Managers or that Project Managers will adapt to Agile.

We agree. We hypothesize that there will continue to be a need for Project Managers and the role will evolve and adapt to the needs of Agile and Product Management processes. The responses to our survey support our hypothesis.



THE EVOLUTION OF THE PROJECT MANAGER

Project Managers can adapt to and thrive in Agile environments, with transition steps built upon Lean Agile practices. This change is not frictionless but can provide organizations the best of Project Management and Agile principles. With the rapid changes in the IT workplace, the Project Manager role is evolving from rigid command and control processes to collaborative empowerment of Stakeholders, working toward the common goal of creating value.

AT A TEAM LEVEL, PROJECT MANAGERS WILL NEED TO UPSKILL AND EVOLVE INTO NEW ROLES.

With the pace of technology accelerating rapidly, IT professionals must be prepared to continuously grow their skills throughout their careers. Project Managers will likely find their role evolving into the role of Scrum Master, Product Owner or Release Train Engineer (RTE) on an Agile team or Agile Release Train. While these roles are different from a typical Project Manager, they do draw on common Project Management competencies such as planning, managing scope, building roadmaps, identifying and mapping risks and managing day-to-day progress. Project Managers can step in and succeed on Agile teams by pursuing the Agile training and domain knowledge required for their new position.

AT A PORTFOLIO LEVEL, PROJECT MANAGERS WILL GET INVOLVED IN MULTIPLE ACTIVITIES IN EVOLUTIONARY ROLES.

Agility is not restricted only to teams working iteratively to develop solutions – the principles of Agile also apply to strategy and IT portfolios. Scrum teams working iteratively on the practice level may not work well under a traditional Waterfall project structure. Agile principles must extend to the overall portfolio to optimize value delivery. Therefore, Project Managers can also perform larger, strategic roles at the Portfolio and Program levels to support initiatives across multiple teams.

COORDINATING VALUE STREAMS

Portfolios should operate in a decentralized manner organized around value streams following a Lean Portfolio Model. This involves creating, managing and coordinating the development of value streams in which teams work together to build solutions through Agile Release Trains (ARTs) and solution trains. ARTs are cross-functional teams that deliver workable software in an iterative manner.

A key function that Project Managers can play in a Lean Portfolio Model is to coordinate value streams.

- The role might be called a Portfolio Lead or Value Stream Manager.
- This coordination is distinct from day-to-day Project Management, which is commonly misinterpreted as micromanagement of resources.



“Resources” is not a term used in people-centered Agile frameworks. Agility promotes empowering practitioners to self-organize in teams and work collaboratively. In an Agile environment, Project Managers function as liaisons working with multiple teams in value streams to identify, understand and resolve dependencies to facilitate smoother workflows. Project Managers work with Human Resources to identify Agile team members and empower them through continuous improvement initiatives.

SUPPORTING A LEAN PORTFOLIO ENVIRONMENT

Lean Portfolio Management (LPM) avoids centralized, project-based, top-down funding and decision making in favor of participative budgeting. Everyone, including the teams working on the ground, are involved. The portfolios link to the enterprise strategy, and the portfolio vision is realized through Epics.

In a Lean Portfolio environment, Project Managers can be tasked with any or all the following activities depending on the specific circumstances:



- Coordinate value streams
- Support program execution
- Promote operational excellence
- Align work to strategy and enterprise vision
- Coordinate compliance guardrails
- Focus on reporting outcomes and OKRs
- Measure portfolio performance
- Manage Agile budgets and Agile contracts
- Financial governance, spending and audits
- Communication liaison – value stream investments

IN A HYBRID STRUCTURE, PROJECT MANAGERS WILL WORK CLOSELY WITH SCRUM TEAMS, CONTINUE SOME TRADITIONAL PROJECT MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES, WHILE ALSO LEARNING AND ADOPTING EMERGING AGILE PRACTICES.

Currently, many large enterprises are working in a hybrid model, where elements of Agile are embedded within traditional Project Management structures. Agile Project Management is a term sometimes used to describe hybrid models though the term technically is a misnomer. Nonetheless, Project Managers continue to play important roles in these transitory structures.

Where traditional methods of Program and Project funding are followed in hybrid environments, Project Managers continue to drive many of these activities. They work with PMO staff to calculate ROI, planned versus actual budget, planned versus actual capacity, utilization, perform benefits realization and other key reporting activities.

Future Roles & Areas of Influence for Project Managers

Enterprise Maturity	Potential Roles at Team Level	Areas of Influence at Portfolio Level
Agile Enterprises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrum Master • Product Owner • Release Train Engineer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value Stream Coordination • Agile Contracts • Agile PMO • Compliance & security • Etc. <p>(Roles at the Portfolio Level are still evolving. An example role could be Value Stream Manager)</p>
Hybrid / In-Transit Enterprises 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Manager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional Project and Program Management



9 TIPS FOR HOW A PROJECT MANAGER CAN SUCCEED IN AN AGILE ENVIRONMENT

Below are actionable tips to help Project Managers succeed in Team, Portfolio and Hybrid contexts.

#1: DEVELOP AGILE SKILLS

Project Managers need to maintain a variety of professional skills to excel in their roles, including continuously learning and adapting to current frameworks, practices, techniques and evolving technologies. This includes frameworks such as Scrum, Scaled Agile (SAFe) and technologies such as Data Analytics and Cloud. [The Project Management Institute \(PMI\) recommends six upskilling areas for Project Managers](#): Data Science, Innovative Mindset, Security and Privacy Knowledge, Legal and Regulatory Compliance Knowledge, Data Driven Decision Making and Collaborative Leadership.

#2: KNOW THE PROCESSES YOUR ORGANIZATION USES

Project Managers must know the internal processes and requirements for project initiation, planning, governance and execution in their current position. Not fully understanding planning processes can lead to unrealistic schedules, avoidable delays and missed deadlines. For example, if your project begins three months late because you were not aware that your PMO has a three-month backlog of projects to take through the governance process, then you are starting with a three-month deficit and a high probability of missing your planned implementation date.

#3: ADOPT A LEAN PORTFOLIO MINDSET

As enterprises shift to Lean Portfolio Management ([as prescribed by SAFe](#)), Project Managers will need to learn and adopt to the key LPM constructs and practices. PMOs should not have processes that are in direct conflict with the way Scrum teams work. PMOs need to adapt to support the Scrum teams and develop ways to add value without adding additional constrictive reporting practices.

#4: MAKE SCHEDULES REALISTIC

Project Managers should collaborate on estimates with the individual team members who produce the work product, as a common Project Manager mistake is underestimating how long it takes to get work done.

With the advent of Program Iteration planning, the processes for planning, estimation, prioritization and dependency management have changed drastically. Planning and scheduling are no longer the solitary responsibility of the Project Manager and are now a collective team effort. Clear visibility of dependencies, risks and cross-team collaboration helps create realistic schedules that account for unforeseen circumstances.

#5: CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PROJECT TEAM

A Project Manager needs the ability to connect with team members in order to successfully build relationships with all the individual contributors and their managers, as well as all the key Stakeholders and any external service providers and vendors. People always work better together when they know and respect each other.

Communicate appreciation to all the participants and formally recognize their contributions to the team's success. Many traditional Waterfall projects are long and participants don't often receive positive feedback. In Agile projects, more opportunities to say 'thank you' exist because you can celebrate successes in Sprint and Program Increment (PI) ceremonies.



Successful Project Managers can walk the fine line between being friendly, collegial and finding common ground with their project teams while still being assertive enough to push when needed to keep things on track. Assertiveness is more effective when the Project Manager is respected and liked by the team. This skill is even more critical in Agile initiatives. Agile teams are self-contained and highly autonomous, and in some cases may feel that the Project Manager is superfluous or an outsider. The Project Manager needs to have the emotional intelligence to navigate difficult situations and win over the team by breaking down barriers of resistance. This can be achieved by demonstrating value, building credibility over time and working to remove barriers to the team's success. Agility is still new to many organizations, and highly relational Project Managers can play a key role in successful Agile transformation.

#6: WORK FROM AHEAD

A Project Manager should work from ahead, meaning they keep an eye on the work that needs to be done over the next several weeks, especially for tasks on the critical path. In any project, problems, issues and risks constantly arise and can seriously derail a project if not quickly addressed. By identifying impediments early, there is more time to remove or mitigate them before they negatively impact the schedule.

With Agile projects, this becomes less complex for the Project Manager. Agile teams typically plan 10-to-12-week Program Increments (PIs). The Project Manager only focuses on the current PI, as the details of the future PIs are not formalized until the PI Planning meetings that precede them. This narrower window of focus means that the Project Manager adapts to a different view of success defined by the value delivered at the end of each PI, and not by the completion of a whole product.

#7: STICK THE LANDING

Great Project Managers place strong emphasis on well planned, coordinated implementations. Anyone who has watched the Olympics understands the meaning and importance of “sticking the landing.” This applies primarily to gymnastics, as the athletes dismount from their routines and need to have a controlled landing. A botched landing can ruin a tremendous performance and be the difference between a gold medal or an also-ran at the end of the competition. The same concept applies to the delivery aspect of a project. While the final production implementation is clearly the most visible and important aspect, there are other significant events, such as Penetration Tests, System Integration Tests, Load/Performance Tests, Contingency Tests and User Acceptance Tests, that need to succeed to keep the project on schedule and maintain the confidence and morale of the team. The following techniques help accomplish this:

- Identifying and notifying all participants
- Identifying all prerequisite tasks on the critical path that need to be completed
- Documenting a detailed implementation plan and script
- Obtaining approval of the plan from Stakeholders
- Walking through the script as many times as needed until there is complete agreement on it
- Establishing a command center with preplanned status checkpoints
- Keeping an open line for drop in questions
- Providing a status at the end of the event

Many of the risks associated with implementations and test events are reduced in Agile organizations with mature Continuous Integration Continuous Deployment (CI/CD) pipelines and DevOps processes, but there is still a need to stick the landing on implementations and large tests. The Project Manager is in the best position to lead these activities, demonstrate value and earn the confidence of the team.

#8: RECORD AND APPLY LESSONS LEARNED

A Project Manager should incorporate Lessons Learned. The concept of continuous improvement has been in existence for a long time, and the process of documenting Lessons Learned has become part of the orthodoxy of Project Management. Lessons Learned add to the organization's knowledge base and can be applied to future activities increasing the probability of success. Leveraging Lessons Learned is a regular feature of Agile teams, as Sprint Retrospectives and PI Planning meetings incorporate similar activities into their feedback loops.

#9: COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

A successful Project Manager is an effective communicator. Clear, crisp communication, concise and accurate status reports, intelligible metrics, actionable insights into project activity and consistent delivery according to the cadences established in the Communication Plan all contribute to project success and reduce uncertainty, ambiguity and wasted effort.



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