

Methodologies and Frameworks Don't Deliver Projects - People Do!

Waterfall vs. Agile – A Different Perspective

By Lutz P. Bendig

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Plenty of passionate debate rages about what is the better way to deliver IT Projects and Programs: should you apply the rather traditional 'Waterfall' approach, or should you use 'Agile'?

Based on over 25 years of experience delivering large-scale IT and Digital Transformation Projects and Programs, applying both Waterfall-based methodologies as well as Agile-based frameworks, this is my perspective.

Are We Really On The Same Page?

I was about to start this article by stating the assumption that every reader already understands what 'Waterfall' and 'Agile' actually means – and here we are straight onto the first, and maybe single-biggest, problem with this comparison: whilst most people seem have a reasonably good and broadly aligned understanding of the Waterfall approach (quite possibly due it being around for ages?), the same cannot be said when it comes to Agile. Ask any number of different people within any organisation to describe Agile, and you will most likely receive an equivalent number of different interpretations - many of them rather of the mark or even outright wrong.

Whilst most people genuinely believe their own individual explanations to be accurate, whenever there are widely varying interpretations of the same, naturally this means that not all of them can be true at the same time, and some must simply be wrong!

So how can we expect to successfully adapt to and deploy an implementation approach if even people within the same organisation don't understand, and are not aligned on, how it actually works?

What Are The Key Differences Between These Methodologies?

Here we are straight onto the second key problem: whilst Waterfall-based approaches (like Prince2 for example) are indeed methodologies with clearly prescribed steps, actions etc., Agile-based approaches (like Scrum for example) are NOT methodologies, but frameworks, and the ways in which they are applied are entirely up to the individual organisation, or even individual project teams within.

Waterfall-based methodologies essentially provide you with a 'cookbook' approach, describing in detail how to deliver a project, whereas Agile-based frameworks merely define the principles (e.g. 'Embrace Change') that should be applied, and the routines and ceremonies that need to be established (e.g. 'Retrospectives' etc.) - in other words these frameworks define what you should be doing, yet leave the how pretty much up to you.

Why Do Some Organisations Struggle With ‘Agile’ (And Others With ‘Waterfall’)?

Back to the first point above, many organisations and individuals within do not really understand the basic principles etc. that need to be adhered to when applying an Agile-based approach.

Without clear understanding, and even more importantly without having significant experience in utilising Agile frameworks, and not fully understanding how to apply them in the real world (quite often coupled with completely omitting key elements of the chosen framework – I have observed fundamental roles like Product Owner not even be filled, let alone by an appropriately experienced and empowered individual...), it is indeed very difficult to successfully deliver anything with an Agile-based approach – of course the same holds true for Waterfall-based projects: without good understanding of and experience in applying a Waterfall-based approach, these project are running into trouble quickly as well.

Unfortunately, and as consequence of the above, typically it is the methodology or framework that is blamed for these failures: ‘Agile doesn’t work’ (is touted by the Waterfall-proponents) and equally ‘Waterfall doesn’t work’ (touted by, you guessed it, the Agile-proponents...).

The reality is that both approaches require significant experience to be applied successfully. And maybe somewhat surprisingly, and possibly even contrary to popular belief, Agile-based approaches require at least the same, if not more experience to use them with success - Ken Schwaber and Jeff Sutherland, who together developed the Scrum-framework, one of the most-used Agile frameworks, quite succinctly (and very accurately!) state that ‘*Scrum is easy to understand but difficult to master*’.

So Which One Is Better?

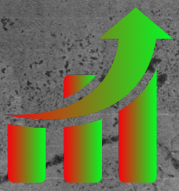
Here is where the fun really starts (that is, if you enjoy following the passionate, but quite often also rather dogmatic and at times hysterical debates playing out in relevant forums on this very question...)!

Before offering an answer, let me start by admitting that personally I’m a firm believer in the value and power Agile-based approaches can provide when applied properly. That said though: a well-executed project using a Waterfall-based approach will be more successful than a badly executed one using an Agile-based approach – of course the opposite is equally true!

In my view the real question is not simply ‘which one is better’, but needs to take into consideration the individual situation, including level of uncertainty inherent in the intended project, and most importantly experience of the organisation and people involved in the project: for example the more uncertainty exists, the more I’d recommend an Agile-based approach, as it supports the frequent changes that likely result from this uncertainty; conversely, if there is a very clear understanding of what needs to be created and delivered, a Waterfall approach might do the job equally well.

Plus: there is nothing stopping organisations to blend elements of either approaches. The key to success in either case is to involve people with relevant experience (and did I mention you should also listen to their advise...?).

In summary, there is no definitive answer for which approach to take: important is to ensure, based on the overall situation, the relevant skills and experiences are available to help inform this decision, and to then guide the project. After all, both approaches DO work when executed well, and when everybody involved is ‘on the same page’.



What Do I Recommend?

- Ensure that you really understand how either approach works, and their pros and cons. If you do not have that expertise in-house, engage experts who demonstrably do have this experience - and importantly listen to and be guided by their advise!
- Ensure that everybody involved in the project is 'on the same page', fully understands the chosen methodology or framework, and 'speaks the same language'. If required, provide relevant training.
- Put effective support and governance structures in place (yes, both Waterfall as well as Agile-based approaches demand structure!).
- If moving from Waterfall to Agile, start with a small / non-critical project; expect things to go wrong / errors to be made (in other words: learning takes place!), and focus on their resolution and the adaption of lesson's learned. rather than whose fault it was.
- When adopting an Agile-based approach, rather than simply aiming to 'do Agile', strive for 'being Agile' – acknowledging that Agile is first and foremost a mindset and philosophy, described through values and principles, and brought to life by frameworks designed to help translate this thinking into tangible activities.
- And maybe most importantly, always remember:

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Good Luck With Your Endeavours!!



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Through his company Lutz is helping organisations by offering a range of IT Project Management Consulting Services including Project Reviews / Health Checks, Steering Committee Guidance and Coaching, Project Establishment and Governance Advice, Reviews of Business Cases and Proposals as well as Project Management Coaching and Training.

Lutz is very passionate about all aspects of IT Project and Program Management, and is a firm believer in the criticality and importance of 'The Human Element' to successfully achieve Digital Business Transformations.