

# The State of Agile

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## Summary

Agile at its most effective has the hallmarks of a social science or organisational psychology phenomenon, and not much at all to do with technical practices. If we accept this assertion, then I suggest it behoves Agile promoters to consider the implications of Agile adoption in the light of social science, along with individual and organisational psychology. From this perspective, the State of Agile is looking vulnerable – precarious even. But have no fear! Agile has already brought much pleasure and (job)satisfaction to many thousands of people, and points the way towards more effective organisations. Even if Agile crashes and burns, with its and a myriad of other contributions, I believe the world of work is changing for the better.

*About me: I have been in software development and the technology business for nearly forty years. I've written compilers, interpreters, software tools, commercial, financial and embedded systems. I've designed and architected things from the very small to the massively huge. As a coach and advisor I've seen all kinds of development shops and approaches, from tech start-ups through to global corporates. I've been learning about agile since circa 1994, owning and running the UK's first 100% agile software house in the process. I find my vocation lies in helping people, my motivation in seeing folks have a more fulfilling life at work in tech businesses, and I've spent 25+ years seeking answers to the question "why is software development most everywhere still done so badly?"*

"Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.  
After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water."  
- Wu Li

## Tipping Point...

More and more folks within the Agile community claim that the Agile flavour of software development has reached some kind of tipping point. That non-IT people within businesses and other organisations have begin to appreciate the benefits that Agile software development has to offer over more traditional means of developing software, to the point where these business folks are considering trialling it, or even adopting it.

Certainly I'd agree that over the past few years we have seen a marked upswing in interest in the word "Agile" from the business community - although maybe less pronounced in the UK and Europe than elsewhere. And in an increasing number of cases, that upswing of interest does seem to have spurred businesses – or their IT departments , at least – to try out agile methods on one or more of their projects.

Some prominent opinionioneers in the agile community even assert that in some years, Agile software development will sweep away more established approaches and become the "new normal".

How realistic is this? We have seen false dawns before, in the shape of e.g. Structured Methods (SSADM et al), 3GLs, 4GLs, CASE tools, formal methods (VDM,Z), the 5th Generation (MITI), Object Orientation (OOA/D/P), Process Improvement (BPR, CMMI). Each of these has, of course, added to our sum of knowledge, and given us new means to do better. But none has swept the board(room).

Now, along with Agile (Scrum, XP, Kanban et al), we also have Lean software development, Systems Thinking, Deming, Theory of Constraints, “professionalism” a.k.a. certifications, Action Science, and more.

As a grass-roots initiative, Agile has come a long way in its short life, and garnered much support from practitioners.

But is Agile really the best bet for businesses looking to do something positive about gaining competitive advantage, better serving their customers and markets, or making more money?

Is Agile even a good bet? Have we, the practitioners - in our giddy delight at finding something that makes our work more enjoyable, interesting and meaningful, with the promise of transforming business itself - blithely ignored the elephant in the room?

## ...or Knife-edge?

Personally, I see the current state of Agile as less at a tipping-point than poised on a knife-edge. Many adopting organisations report relatively positive early experiences with Agile. Positive, at least with respect to the “usual” criteria; predictability, quality, cost, timescales, productivity. And positive even for “softer” or more general criteria such as employee engagement, effectiveness and stakeholder satisfaction.

My own work with Rightshifting, and in particular [the Marshall Model of Organisational Evolution](#), however, has thrown up a key question. The aforementioned Elephant in the Room:

### Assumptions

- New-mindset-for-practitioners: Adopting Agile, so that it’s “done right” and delivers its promised benefits, necessitates its practitioners adopt a certain new (contrary to prevailing norms) perspective on the world of work. I refer to this as the “Synergistic” mindset.
- Prevailing-mindset-for-organisation: Most organisations which are candidates for Agile adoption have a prevailing non-Agile view of the world of work. I refer to this as the “Analytic” (or possibly even “Ad-hoc”) mindset.
- Cognitive-dissonance: Having different groups within an organisation, each holding markedly and observably different views of the world of work (e.g. Analytic, Synergistic) will inevitably lead to both tension and alienation.
- Local-optimisation: As long as the scope of Agile adoption remains limited to practitioners (i.e. in one small corner of the organisation as a whole), their new mindset is likely to remain relatively unnoticed, and unlikely to cause significant tension and alienation in other areas of the organisation. But in this case, Agile will deliver little, if any, significant business benefit (i.e. to the “bottom line”). Practitioners, of course, might be relatively happy with the new ways of doing things, in the short term, at least.

## **The key questions, then, for me become:**

In the case of Cognitive-dissonance:

How long can an organisation tolerate this state of tension and alienation, a.k.a. “organisational cognitive dissonance”, before feeling compelled to resolve it?

In the case of Local-optimisation:

How long can an organisation tolerate a new and opaque way of working that appears to indulge its practitioners without delivering any significant business benefit?

And as subsidiary questions:

How is a state of increasing tension and alienation likely to resolve itself?

What are the alternative outcomes we can foresee?

And what relative likelihood for each such outcome?

And finally:

Given the above questions, what is the prognosis for Agile adoption in most (i.e. Analytic) organisations? And thus, what is the prognosis for the way the world of business will come to regard Agile in future?

I leave the answers to these questions to you, dear readers – and to the unfolding future, which we explore together...

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