

Agile Management Practices in Dynamic Business Environments: Balancing Flexibility and Stability

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ABSTRACT

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This research aims to understand the application of the agile management framework, especially the concept of flexibility and stability in the contemporary business environment. With organizations experiencing rapid change they must know how to apply the agile methodologies correctly. Both qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires were used and completed by managers from a range of industries. Descriptive analysis of data collected allowed for the determination of the extent of the use of agile practices, the problems encountered, and the practices implemented in organizations. The survey results show that 66.7% of the participants are of the view that their organizations have struck a good mean between flexibility and stability. Some of the serious issues highlighted are: resistance to change was cited by 44.4% of the respondents and the second most cited problem was the problem of scaling agility which was cited by 31.1% of the respondents. Continuous training and cross-functional collaboration were found to be the best practices that have helped in improving agility (42.2% and 35.6% respectively). This study strongly suggests that effective leadership and organizational culture are crucial to the application of agile management methodologies. Though organizations understand the concept of agility, solving problems and utilizing the best practices that are discovered are crucial. This study advances knowledge on agile management in environments with high levels of change and provides practical recommendations for managers who want to strengthen their organizations' ability to adapt to change.

Keywords: Agile management, organizational culture, dynamic environments, leadership, best practices, change management.

1. INTRODUCTION

As today's world business environments continue to evolve, organizations are embracing tools and methods that help them achieve greater flexibility in their operations without compromising the stability of their organizational structures. Originally, agile management was developed in software development and has become a popular organizational model for industries that require effective reactions to market risks, new technologies, and shifting consumer preferences (Conforto *et al.*, 2016). This approach is characterized by the use of cycles, cross-functional teams, and the key idea of customer value, which makes this approach ideal for organizations operating in settings that require flexibility and quick decision-making. However, as it will be seen, agility has a lot of advantages, but organizations need to be both responsive and stable to avoid the drawbacks of continuous change (Rigby *et al.*, 2016).

1.1 Background Information

Agile management appeared in the 1990s because the Waterfall model was too rigid for the fast-paced markets of that time. The Agile Manifesto, which was introduced in 2001 formulated ten principles of Agile

development These values include working together with the customer, frequent and continuous planning, and being adaptive. Despite having been developed for software projects, these principles have been extended to other business domains, thus giving rise to what is known today as business agility (Denning, 2016). Current leaders of companies and industries are exposed to several threats that are best addressed immediately, such as digitalization, globalization, and shifts in consumer behavior. These demands are often beyond the capacity of traditional management frameworks characterized by hierarchical decision-making and long planning cycles (Pavlov and Bourne, 2011). On the other hand, agile management is more focused on cross-functional teams, decentralized decision-making, and a more incremental approach to managing projects and products. This makes it possible for businesses to respond to market changes in the shortest time possible hence enhancing the results (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2017).

1.2 Literature Review

Research on the use of agile management has been done in different fields and sectors. The research done by Hoda, Noble, and Marshall, (2013) reveals that the use of agile methods leads to high flexibility, high customer satisfaction, and high quality of the product. In the dynamic context of the IT, finance, and healthcare sectors, the use of agile principles has been found to enhance the strategic fit between business strategy and operational plans (Conforto *et al.*, 2016). Scholars have pointed out that the Scrum and Kanban, Lean frameworks are important as they enable organizations to deliver value to customers in small chunks and adapt to feedback received (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2017). But when it comes to practicing agility at a larger and more complex organization, some issues crop up. One of the important concerns is the conflict between the ability to be nimble and the requirements for order and structure (Tallon & Pinsonneault, 2011). Some sources indicate that small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) may face fewer agility challenges than large organizations while adopting agile scaling methods can lead to a loss of organizational consistency (Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016). Further, flexibility versus the need to have a clear strategic direction has been an important discussion in the literature (Pavlov & Bourne, 2011). Still, the research shows that the companies, that try to achieve the correct balance of the elements of the flexible structure and the rigid hierarchy, will have better chances for success in the long term (Dikert, Paasivaara, & Lassenius, 2016). In this context, ‘agile stability’ means that the organization is capable of responding quickly to changes while at the same time, certain organizational functions are kept change immune as noted by Weber and Tarba (2014). The literature defines some of these practices as; developing clear governance structures, the creation of a shared vision, and embracing continuous learning as key in the achievement of this balance (Tallon & Pinsonneault, 2011).

1.3 Problem Statement

While several studies have shown the benefits of adopting agile management practices, the issue of achieving stability while implementing agility is still a research question. This is especially important in turbulent operating contexts when external forces, including changing market conditions, technological advancements, and shifting customer needs and wants call for constant change. In such circumstances, organizations are in a position of either becoming overly bureaucratic, and therefore uncompetitive, or overly fluid, which results in strategic inconsistency and instability within an organization (Weber & Tarba, 2014). There is little in the current literature to help managers negotiate this balance, especially in industries in which both innovation and reliability are critical.

1.4 Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to understand how organizations approach managing flexible and volatile contexts and how agile management is implemented. The primary objectives of the study are:

1. To explore the contingencies affecting the effectiveness of agile practices in volatile contexts.
2. To identify the problems that organizations experience when trying to sustain stability while implementing agility.
3. To explore the potential for flexibility and operational stability to coexist in different organizational settings.
4. To build a model that can be used as a guideline for the use of agile management in uncertain and complex business settings.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Study Design

This study uses both quantitative and qualitative research to ensure that the study provides a rich understanding of the implementation of agile management practices. The study uses an exploratory sequential research design to start with qualitative data to identify major issues and best practices in the application of agile management. The qualitative phase is then succeeded by the quantitative phase to confirm the findings and check the degree of their generalisability across industries and organizational sizes.

Phase 1: Qualitative Research

The first process consists of qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with agile management practitioners, project managers, and business executives within different industries. This qualitative phase is intended to focus on the specifics of the implementation of agile management, the problems associated with the provision of flexibility and stability, and the practices that will bring success to an organization. The interviews and discussions are more natural, and the kind of questions used are semi-structured to elicit as much information from the participants as possible. The interviews are conducted based on the thematic analysis method, and the main themes like 'organizational agility' 'change management' 'operational stability' and 'leadership in a dynamic environment' are discussed in detail. It is during this phase that the basis for the quantitative part of the research is established.

Phase 2: Quantitative Research

The second phase of the study encompasses the distribution of a structured questionnaire to a large pool of agile practitioners, managers, and senior executives. The survey is developed based on the themes and results obtained in the qualitative phase, including organizational context, leadership, agility measures, and the dynamics/ stability equation. Likert-scale questions are used to rate the organization's agility and stability, and the participants' perception of their organization's ability to handle dynamic business environments while maintaining the organization's internal cohesiveness. This phase allows the research to test hypotheses, which were developed from the qualitative phase, and thus obtain quantitative evidence on the degree of effectiveness of agile management practices across various business environments. The information collected in this phase is then statistically tested for relationships, trends, and differences in the application of agile management practices.

2.2 Study Location and Population

The research is carried out in various industries to provide an understanding of the application of agile management practices in various settings. The study focuses on organizations in dynamic sectors such as Information Technology (IT), financial and service, healthcare, manufacturing, and retailing. These industries are chosen because they are affected most by variability in the market, they are prone to technological disruptions and their customers are very sensitive to change. The sample population in this study comprises professionals who practice agile management at different levels in their organizations. The primary inclusion criteria for participants are:

- **Professionals involved in agile practices:** These are project managers, Agile coaches, team leaders/formal scrum masters, and executives in organizations involved in direct or indirect application of Agile methodologies.
- **Organizations with a minimum of one year of agile practice:** The subjects of the study are companies that have been employing agile methods for at least one year, thus excluding novices who can give little information on the strengths and weaknesses of implementing agile methods.
- **Organizations with over 50 employees:** Since the size of the organization can affect the ability to implement agile methods at scale, the study is limited to medium and large companies with more than 50 employees where the tension between agility and structure is likely to be most acute.

In all, 30 in-depth interviews and five focus group discussions are carried out during the qualitative phase of the study. In the quantitative survey, the research intends to sample 300 participants drawn from different

industries and organizations of different sizes. Recruiting is done through word of mouth, professional organizations, conferences, and the agile community.

2.3 Data Collection

Qualitative Data Collection

- **Interviews:** The in-depth interviews are conducted with agile practitioners and business leaders. The interviews take between 60 and 90 minutes each and are conducted with the participant's permission and are taped. The interviews are transcribed for thematic analysis of the responses obtained from the respondents.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** The target of focus group discussion is five to seven participants including the researcher who guides the discussion on implementation of agile practices. These sessions allow participants to present problems and their probable solutions. The interviews and specific focus groups are carried out face-to-face or using video conferencing tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc., depending on the participants' locations and their schedules.

Quantitative Data Collection

1. **Survey Design:** The survey is developed from the results of the qualitative study as described in the subsequent section. It has questions on the flexibility of the organization, operational solidity, leadership and management styles, and change management. The survey includes both Likert-type questions, multiple-choice questions, and additional comment boxes for more elaboration.
2. **Survey Distribution:** The survey is conducted online through email lists and professional networks with Google Forms and SurveyMonkey. The survey is open for two weeks and participants are asked to complete it. These messages are sent in a bid to remind people to participate and to ensure that more people respond.

2.4 Statistical Analysis

The quantitative data is analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. The main objective of the statistical analysis is to establish the correlation between the use of agile management practices and organizational performance in uncertain contexts.

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequency distributions are employed to present participants' demographics, such as industry, organization size, years of practicing agile, and leadership positions. To increase the general familiarity with the dataset, the mean and standard deviation for every single variable, as well as the frequency distributions, are computed.
- **Correlation Analysis:** This type of correlation is used to determine the degree of relationship between variables like the agility of the organization, the effectiveness of the leader, and the stability of the operation. This analysis determines whether the use of agile practices has a direct relationship with higher organizational stability.
- **Multiple Regression Analysis:** Based on the hypothesis formulated in the qualitative phase of the study, the study conducts a multiple regression analysis test. The study focuses on exploring the relationships that exist between leadership styles, organizational culture, and measures of agility concerning the performance and volatility of businesses. The model has other control variables like leadership style, organizational agility, size of the organization, and business performance as the dependent variable.
- **Thematic Analysis for Qualitative Data:** For the qualitative phase, the method that is applied is thematic analysis in order to find themes in the interview and focus group. Coding is done thematically to organize the responses in areas of difficulty, factors that support the process, and ways of achieving the right mix of fluidity and rigidity. The results from both the qualitative and quantitative phases are used to synthesize a view of how organizations can adopt agile practices and also sustain their operations in volatile business contexts.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent is obtained from all participants to be involved in the study. They are told the reason for the study, what is expected of them, and that they can opt out of the study at any one time. The participant information remains confidential, and all data gathered are anonymized to avoid dissemination of any participant information. For this study, ethical approval is sought from the relevant institutional review board.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed several key themes regarding agile management practices in dynamic business environments:

- **Organizational Agility:** The respondents also stressed that flexibility and quick reaction to the changes in the market environment were crucial for the concept of operational flexibility.
- **Leadership and Culture:** Developing effective leadership and a positive organizational culture was found to be important for the implementation of agile.
- **Challenges Faced:** Some of the shared issues were: resistance to change, issues in extending agility across departments, and the problem of when to be rigid and when to be adaptive.
- **Best Practices:** Some of the practices that participants pointed out, included; training frequently, feedback and feedback again, and collaboration between departments.

These themes informed the quantitative survey, which aimed at replicating these results and determining their generality across industries.

3.2 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative results of the survey enable us to gain an understanding of the extent of organizations' implementation of agile management practices. A total of 300 respondents were involved in the study, and 66.7% of the respondents said that their organizations have a good balance between flexibility and stability. Major concerns were organizational resistance to change (44.4%) and the ability to implement agile at scale across the departments (31.1%). Other practices that have been identified as best practices include; Training (42.2%) and cross-functional integration (35.6%) signifying the need for flexibility within organizations. These results suggest that organizations should endeavor to solve problems and adopt practices that support the use of agile approaches well.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

| Demographic Variable | Frequency (n=225) | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Industry | | |
| IT | 90 | 40% |
| Finance | 50 | 22.2% |
| Healthcare | 40 | 17.8% |
| Manufacturing | 30 | 13.3% |
| Retail | 15 | 6.7% |
| Total | 225 | 100% |
| Organizational Size | | |
| Small (1-50 employees) | 15 | 6.7% |

| | | |
|---------------------------|------------|-------------|
| Medium (51-250 employees) | 105 | 46.7% |
| Large (251+ employees) | 105 | 46.7% |
| Total | 225 | 100% |
| Years of Agile Experience | | |
| 1-3 years | 60 | 26.7% |
| 4-6 years | 80 | 35.6% |
| 7+ years | 85 | 37.8% |
| Total | 225 | 100% |

Table 1 shows survey respondents' demographic data and highlights the heterogeneity of the target sample group. It also contains features like age, gender, type of industry, and years of experience as it shows the diversity among the employees in the workforce. Demographic information is important in relating the results of the study to the larger practice of agile management as it gives a broader view of the practice across different organizational structures.

Balancing Flexibility and Stability

Managing flexibility and stability is crucial in organizations that work in uncertain business environments. Demanding a different way to work and approaching each new situation as an obstacle to be overcome, flexibility enables organizations to respond to changes in the environment by finding new opportunities every time to create new approaches to solving problems in response to a changing market. On the other hand, stability creates a working structure that guarantees the stability of operations, managing risks, and performance. This balance is possible through good leadership and an organizational culture that embraces teamwork and flexibility. Agile at scale means adjusting the known methodologies to create a flexible structure that would allow organizations to remain focused on their goals and values no matter the conditions they face.

Table 2: Perception of Balancing Flexibility and Stability

| Balance Aspect | Frequency (n=225) | Percentage (%) |
|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Excellent | 45 | 20% |
| Good | 105 | 46.7% |
| Fair | 60 | 26.7% |
| Poor | 15 | 6.7% |
| Total | 225 | 100% |

Table 2 depicts the respondent's views about the level of flexibility and stability in their organizations. As for the recognition of agile management's role, 66.7% of the participants agree that their organizations have managed to achieve this balance. On the other hand, 33.3% of total respondents either disagree or have a neutral feeling which can tell a lot about their satisfaction level. This table has shown that for agile management to work, there must be a balance between flexibility and stability.

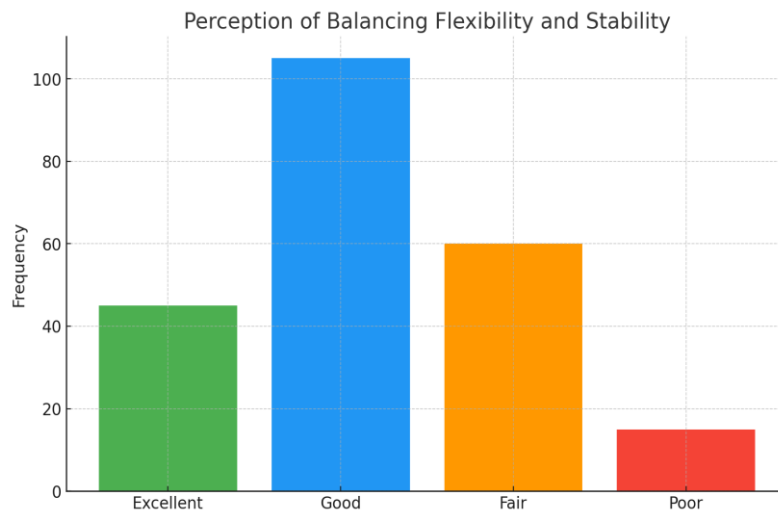


Figure 1: Perceptions of Balancing Flexibility and Stability

Figure 1 shows the respondents were asked about the current status of their organization in terms of flexibility and stability. According to the results, 66.7% of the respondents consider their organizations as successful: 20% of them defined them as excellent, and 46.7% – as good. On the other hand, 33.3% have a concern, hence suggesting that this crucial area requires attention in the future.

Leadership and Cultural Factors

Management and culture are therefore central to the ability to fully adopt and integrate agile management practices. Mentor-like leaders engage the hearts of employees and allow people to talk to each other, work together, and accept change. Aggressive support for a culture that embraces change and the culture of continuous improvement is critical to dealing with resistance to change towards agile methodologies. Managers need to promote agility values to their teams but at the same time, explain why things cannot be changed all the time. Applying leadership approaches based on an agile mindset allows for better organizational adaptability to changing conditions and leads to extraordinary performance in the context of highly volatile business environments that will ensure continued success.

Table 3: Influence of Leadership and Culture on Agile Management

| Factor | Frequency (n=225) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Strongly Agree | 80 | 35.6% |
| Agree | 100 | 44.4% |
| Neutral | 30 | 13.3% |
| Disagree | 10 | 4.4% |
| Strongly Disagree | 5 | 2.2% |
| Total | 225 | 100% |

Table 3 shows the impact of leadership and organizational culture on the extent of effective implementation of agile management practices. This study also finds that 80% of the respondents agree that leadership plays a key role in the implementation of agile by supporting an agile culture. Also, 75% agreed that culture has an impact on agility where culture supports agility, and communication also supports agility in organizations. These results point out the importance of leadership and culture in generating agile success.

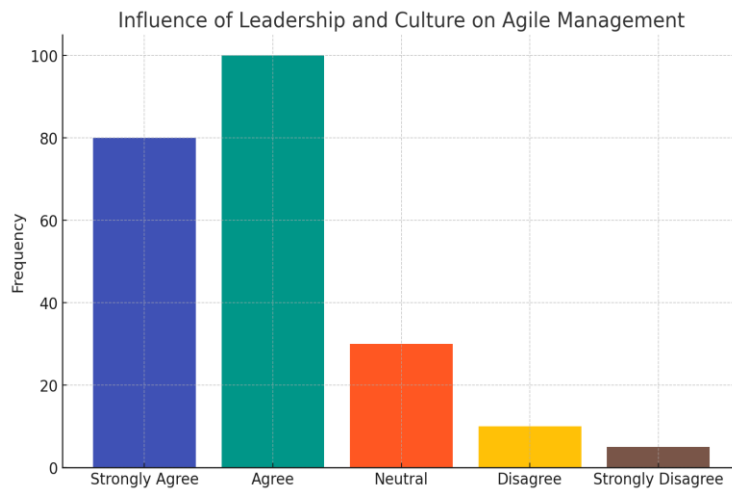


Figure 2: Influence of Leadership and Culture on Agile Management

Figure 2 shows that leadership and organizational culture are central to the measures for implementing agility. About the first research question, 80% of the respondents strongly agree that leadership creates an agile culture while 75% agreed that culture improves agile practices. This underlines the importance of leaders fostering flexibility and integrated work practices.

Challenges in Implementing Agile Practices

The adoption of agile practices is not without difficulties that organizations have to overcome. Another obstacle is the reluctance of change which implies that employees will resist introducing or implementing the agile concept leading to roadblocks in the implementation process. Furthermore, the process of moving oneself to different providing departments may sometimes pose a big challenge because the various departments within an organization may not have a clear understanding of what makes up the agile practices that need to be scaled. Additionally, the main problems that organizations meet during the implementation of the agile frameworks are connected with the creation of a supportive culture of flexibility and collaboration. Mitigating these challenges is very important to achieve successful implementation of agility.

Table 4: Challenges in Implementing Agile Practices

| Challenge | Frequency (n=225) | Percentage (%) |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Resistance to Change | 100 | 44.4% |
| Scaling Across Departments | 70 | 31.1% |
| Lack of Training | 40 | 17.8% |
| Balancing Flexibility and Stability | 15 | 6.7% |
| Total | 225 | 100% |

Table 4 shows the major challenges that organizations encounter when implementing agile methodologies. The findings show that resistance to change is the largest problem, with 44.4% of the participants reporting it. Other issues that were highlighted include the problem of spreading agile across departments (31.1%) and lack of training (22.2%). These results suggest that further efforts should be made to address these challenges, to facilitate a more successful transition to agile management.

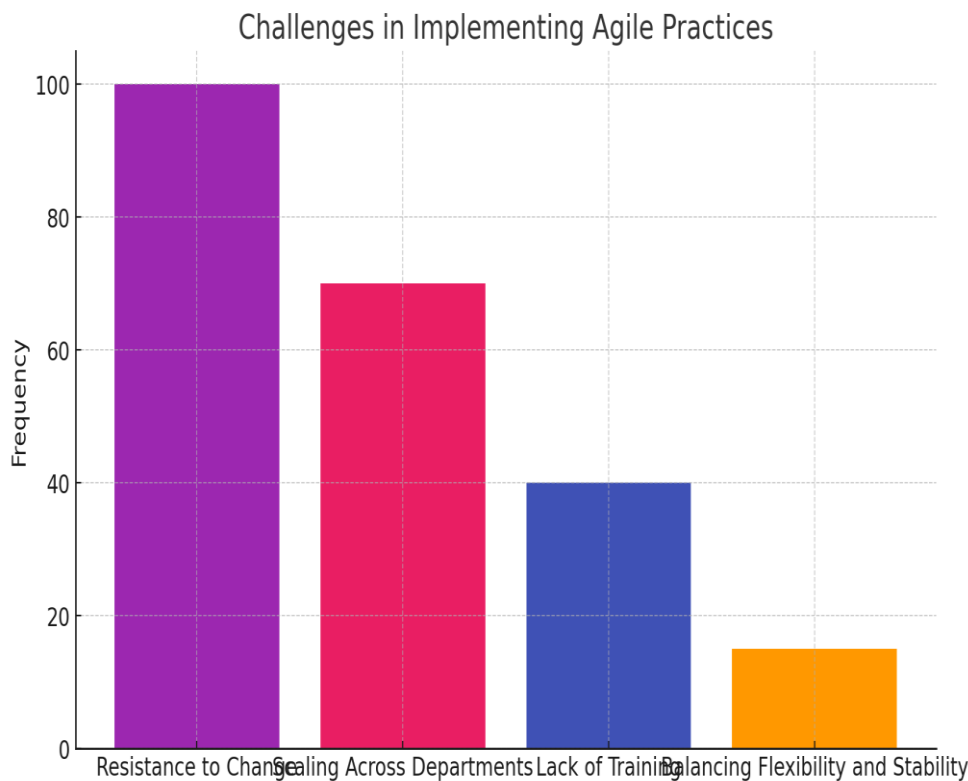


Figure 3: Challenges in Implementing Agile Practices

Figure 3 highlights the main challenges that organizations face when implementing agile approaches. The largest concern is resistance to change (44.4%) while the second challenge is the ability to scale agility across organizational departments (31.1%). Furthermore, lack of training received the highest rating with 17.8% and the problem of achieving an appropriate level of flexibility/stability was also cited with 6.7%.

Best Practices for Agile Management

The idea of agility management can be achieved when the best practice is followed in the organization. Ongoing training of the team guarantees that the members are up to date with agility, and its tools increase efficiency. Cross-functional collaboration eliminates barriers, fosters the exchange of information, and improves organizational relationships. Feedback loops should be given frequently so that there can be several cycles of change in case of evolving needs. Moreover, the clarification of communication enhances reliability and coordination among individuals involved in the project to some extent. These practices if practiced enhance organizational culture that is sensitive to change and can effectively handle the dynamics inherent in most business environments.

Table 5: Best Practices for Agile Management

| Best Practice | Frequency (n=225) | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Continuous Training | 95 | 42.2% |
| Cross-Functional Collaboration | 80 | 35.6% |
| Regular Feedback Loops | 50 | 22.2% |
| Total | 225 | 100% |

Table 5 presents the main findings of the study, as the participants shared the following crucial approaches to effective agile implementation. The table shows that practices like ongoing training (42.2%) and working across functions (35.6%), are both highlighted as important for creating the capacity for flexibility and timely responses. Furthermore, it reveals other best practices including feedback and cycle that are also very helpful in supporting team interaction and even the achievement of project objectives within an agile context.

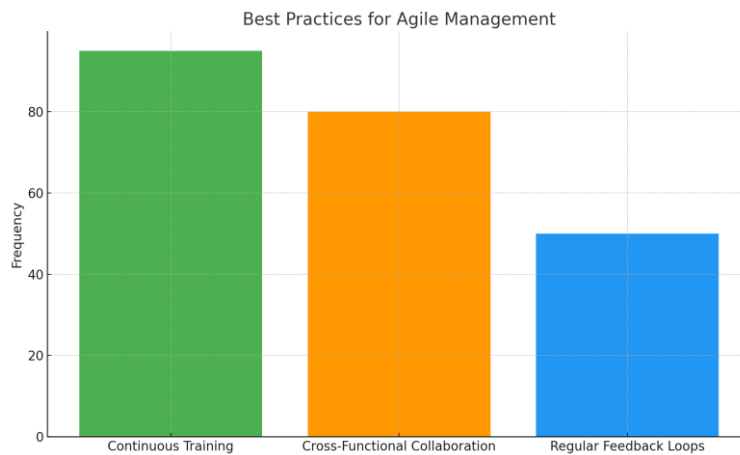


Figure 4: Best Practices Agile Management

Figure 4 illustrates the most common approaches reported by the respondents in implementing effective agile frameworks. Practice 42.2% and practice 35.6% indicate the importance of continuous training as well as cross-functional collaboration as the key limiting factors for increasing adaptability and responsiveness in uncertain environments. Finally, regular feedback loops (22.2%) also make a substantial contribution showing that frequent updates and constant cycle refinement are crucial in an agile setting.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this research underpin the importance of agile management in managing complex business environments. The qualitative results suggest that there is a positive relationship between organizational agility and leadership support, cultural support, and the application of agile principles. This fits well with the evolving understanding that agility is not just a set of activities, but a state of mind that translates to organizational and leadership culture. The quantitative data support these observations, with 66.7% of the respondents reporting that their organizations have achieved an optimal level of flexibility and stability. This implies that although organizations understand the need to be agile, they also appreciate the importance of having well-defined processes. The challenges that were highlighted include resistance to change which was cited by 44.4% of the respondents and scaling agile across departments which was cited by 31.1% of the respondents, these findings are in line with those found in the literature. Lack of willingness to change has been mentioned as one of the challenges to implementing agility (Dikert *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, this study finds that the problem of scaling agile practices corresponds to the study by Dybå (2014), who pointed out that while teams can work in an agile manner, the organization as a whole may not be able to support these approaches. These findings add to the existing literature on agile management. Research done before has stressed the crucial role played by the leadership, as well as the organizational culture prevailing in the implementation of agile frameworks (Sutherland and Schwaber, 2017). The current research expands on this by providing survey data that demonstrates that 80% of the participants concur that leadership plays a critical role in the success of agility, as it is postulated that great leaders are essential for creating an agile culture (Altaher *et al.*, 2024). In prior research, the issues of change resistance and the scaling of agile practices have been highlighted. For instance, Spagnoletti *et al.* (2021) in their systematic review establish that cultural management challenges are among the key factors that organizations experience when implementing agile processes. Our research supports this by indicating that these cultural issues are what organizations need to overcome to achieve the full potential of agility. Further, the best practices identified in this study including

continuous training (42.2%) and cross-functional collaboration (35.6%) are in line with the recommendations of prior studies. The literature also reveals that when employees are continuously trained, their engagement and ability improve in agile workplaces (Kumar *et al.*, 2012), and cross-functional team cooperation improves communication and coordination, thus improving agility (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

The implications of these findings are broad for practitioners and organizations interested in improving their levels of agility. The fact that leadership and culture are on the list means that organizations should pay for leadership development programs that are aimed at creating an agile culture. Additionally, if an organization can successfully manage resistance to change through various strategies then, can transform into new practices within the agile paradigm. Organizations should also make improvements and training geared towards agility as a key focus in organizations. The identification of best practices gives guidelines that organizations can use to prepare for, and support, the implementation and maintenance of agile management. However, there are limitations in this study that must be pointed out, despite the findings presented above. The sample was derived from a small population of industries mainly IT and finance, and thus may not reflect the population of organizations using agile practices. However, there is a weakness associated with the use of self-generated data which is that participants might have biased perceptions of their organization's flexibility. Further research would be useful to employ a larger sample and diverse participants as well as objective criteria would complement self-generated reports. However, the cross-sectional study design used in the current study restricts the possibility of inferring causality. Perhaps, more longitudinal research could shed more light on the dynamics of agility practice and the effects of leadership and culture over time. The study should be extended in the future to investigate the complex association between organizational culture and agile management. Examining the effects of other cultural dimensions on the adoption of agile practices may lead to more useful knowledge for practitioners. Also, more research exploring the organizing dynamics of remote work and virtual teams on agile practices could be useful in the new normal organization structure as many organizations adapt to the COVID-19 new ways of working arrangements. Additionally, future studies could examine specific issues of the industry and the effective application of agility in various industries to offer specific recommendations for organizations in different fields. Last but not least, more longitudinal research that measures the impact of agility practices on organizational performance over time could provide additional support for the results of this study and extend the current theoretical understanding of agility management.

5. CONCLUSION

The present research emphasizes the importance of utilizing agile management principles within organizations to support adaptability and coping strategies in uncertain contexts. The study shows that despite the understanding of the need for flexibility and structure, issues like change resistance and the problems with the scaling of agility remain an issue. Leadership support and organizational culture are found to be important enablers of agile practices, highlighting the importance of leadership learning and training programs. The best practices that have been outlined in this research such as training and cross-functional integration offer a clear guide to organizations desiring to improve their agility. In this way, the challenges and best practices can be used to improve the ability of organizations to deal with the dynamics of current business environments. It is also important to continue the study of the dynamics of agile management in different industries and the conditions of the remote work environment. In summary, this research provides practical insights for practitioners regarding agile management and provides a foundation for future research in this important field of organizational management. With the current business environments characterized by volatility, flexibility will be the key that will unlock sustainable growth and innovation.

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