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ADOPTING AGILE

A different interpretation of the proliferation of agile approaches from the perspective of management fashion theory and institutional theory.



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ABSTRACT

This study is a critical review of the term agile in order to place it in the literature of strategy theories. A study of people with agile knowledge's view on an agile approach have been conducted to examine the development of agile as a management fashion. To support the management fashion theory, institutional theory has been used to further understand and explain why agile is seen as a fashion. This explanation is later used to understand the agile approach's proliferation, which is used to answer the research question: why do organizations choose to adopt an agile approach? The study suggests that the agile approach has been diffused and decontextualized for it to fit into other industries than software development. Within its organizational field, it is being spread through mass media, a common language and interdependencies in complex environments.

Keywords: management fashion theory, institutional theory, agile approach, agile mindset, proliferation

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Denim jackets, iPhones and interruptive YouTube-commercials. We are all aware of different fashion, technology and marketing trends. They exist everywhere, including in management theory (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999). Agile approaches could be seen as one of the latest trends within different organizational fields. New job titles such as ‘agile coach’, ‘product owner’ and ‘agile transformation expert’ have been invented and consultant firms dedicate their time to spread the agile approach. Various agile related certifications are given out and lectures are being held (PMI, 2019; Be Agile, 2019). Agile approaches are being spread in a rapid pace and society is changing just as fast. For many organizations, agile is seen as the solution to many problems.

1.1 Background

As early as in 1993, Mintzberg pointed out that people of all time have claimed *their* time to be the most turbulent, which then, arguably could mean that no time is more turbulent than another. Many have followed Mintzberg’s (1993) critical stance, however this was before the true spread of the internet, before extraordinary technological innovations were released on regular basis and people all around the world networked and interacted with each other like they were next-door neighbors. Today’s society is characterized by accelerating rate of change (Baumann, 2000). The turbulent world and the attitude of today’s individuals result in a new way of organizing. Strategies, methods and models are created to reflect this attitude and turn it into something organizations can adopt and use to create legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). There is a need for organizations to seem modern, like they are keeping up with the times and changes. Following and adopting the latest management fashion is way of doing this (Abrahamson, 1996). Organizations have a desire to reconnect with their purpose and mission (Lencioni, 2002). Agile is one of many methods to help this process. Agile approaches seem to solve a lot of problems for organizations and managers in terms of seeming proactive, engaged and providing legitimacy.

The agile manifesto is the foundation on which the agile approach rests upon. It was created in 2001 by fifteen software developers, stating four important values and twelve principles, to help organize work and produce functioning code (Beck et al., 2001). Since then, many industries have discovered the benefits of adopting an agile approach, for example within marketing, construction and event planning (Greer & Hamon, 2011; Al-Zewairi et al., 2017). Agile exist as a fashion, as a management idea or as a management innovation. They are different terms with the aim to cure different organizational maladies. Although the original intention with creating a management fashion might not have been to find the “one best way”, humans seem obsessed with the idea of the perfect solution. All stressed managers, principals and team leaders could finally rest, if the agile manifesto was the one-way-recipe to success. However, it is not.

Abrahamson (1996) describes the management fashion process in four stages, beginning with creation of the idea, then selection, processing and ending with dissemination. However, there are many branches within management fashion theory. Bort (1995) describes the process in a slightly different way, using a model to explain the different terms and ways of development, while Røvik (2011) uses a virus metaphor to describe the adoption and spread. This study presents Abrahamson's (1996) four-step process, mainly focusing on the processing stage of a fashion, as well as the third stage, dissemination (Abrahamson, 1996).

1.2 Problem Discussion

The proliferation of the agile approach is happening now, which is one of the reasons to why its implications are interesting and relevant to study. Based on the current state of society, which is characterized by turbulence, shifting demand and a drive to find the one best solution (Baumann, 2000; Bort, 1995), new strategies pop up everywhere, claiming to be the solution to existing problems. There is little time to find any empirical evidence of the strategies' effects before new fashions pop up. Present literature on agile approaches consist largely of pop-culture or articles written for practitioners and managers (e.g. Rigby et al., 2016; Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001).

Moreover, many studies regarding management fashion theory focus on the adoption of a fashion (Røvik, 2011). An example would be the study by Cram and Newell (2016) who discusses how agile development can be examined with the help of management fashion theory and examines the adoption and the use of agile approaches. Others make comparative studies between different fashions or strategies (Carson et al., 2000; Naylor et al., 1999). Additionally, there is much academic literature discussing the connection between management fashion theories and institutional theory (Perkmann & Spicer, 2008; Volberda et al., 2014).

The study aims to take another approach, combining earlier studies. The theoretical framework will consist of institutional theory and management fashion theory combined, stating agile approaches as a management fashion. Management fashion theory will help explain the different stages agile approaches have gone through where it has been diffused and spread. The diffusion will be interpreted in accordance with management fashion theory and institutional theory. Moreover, institutional theory will be used to gain further insight and understanding what has happened during the last two stages of the management fashion process and why the proliferation has started and how it has been maintained. By stating agile approaches as a fashion, it is easier to understand and explain the proliferation and adoption of agile approaches.

The study presents interviews with mainly consultants, such as agile coaches, from different companies. Agile coaches are, according to management fashion process theory, fashion setters and have influence over organizations (Abrahamson, 1996). With the explanation of the proliferation of agile approaches alongside the in-depth interviews, the study hopes to bring new insights to agile approaches and contribute to the literature and the application of management fashion theories and institutional theory.

1.3 Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of the study is to map out the principles on which agile approaches rest upon and try to explain the process it went through to become the ‘buzzword’ it is today. It will try to maintain a critical outlook of the phenomenon in order to provide a new perspective on how the proliferation have contributed to why organizations choose to adopt agile approaches. The study will try to give a more nuanced picture of agile, describing by what means agile is being spread, with the aim to address the research question;

- Why do organizations choose to adopt an agile approach?

1.4 Agile Approaches

Ever since the early 1990s, agile approaches have been widely used within the software development industry and is now spreading across a wide range of industries and functions (Greer & Hamon, 2011; Al-Zewairi et al., 2017). The meaning of the word agile is ‘able to move quickly and easily’ or ‘able to think or understand quickly’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2019), with focus being on ‘quickly’.

Agile methods use small iterations where each iteration rely on feedback to receive optimal customer satisfaction (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001). Agile methods are usually used in smaller businesses or teams as a project manager tool but is also being implemented in larger organizations. There are several agile methods and they usually have detailed instructions on how to implement the method into your business, examples are lean, Scrum, XP and Kanban. The agile method Scrum contains terms such as scrum master, which functions as a team leader responsible for the process of implementing the method, or product owner, which is almost synonym to the title project manager (Al-Zewairi et al., 2017). In this study, what differs agile method to agile approach is that an agile method is more specific and detailed, while an agile approach would mean that the organization takes inspiration from the agile methodology, for example the agile manifesto.

Agile software development started spreading on a larger scale after the agile manifesto was published in 2001 (Beck et al., 2001). However, it still took a few years before it reached other industries and today agile is a legitimate and, in some industries, an expected way of organizing and working (e.g. PMI.org).

The agile manifesto is the foundation for most agile methods. It is today an established methodology, not only within software development, but in other team-based projects as well. The four fundamental values presented in the agile manifesto (Beck et al., 2001) are as follows:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools.
- Working software over comprehensive documentation.
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation.
- Responding to change over following a plan.

Beside the four values, the agile manifesto consists of twelve principles listed below (Beck et al., 2001).

Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software.

Welcome changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change for the customer's competitive advantage.

Deliver working software frequently, from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, with a preference to the shorter timescale.

Businesspeople and developers must work together daily throughout the project.

Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need and trust them to get the job done.

The most efficient and effective method of conveying information to and within a development team is face-to-face conversation.

Working software is the primary measure of progress.

Agile processes promote sustainable development. The sponsors, developers, and users should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely.

Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility.

Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential.

The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams.

At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.

Highsmith and Cockburn (2001), one of the founders of the manifesto, believes that today's organizations operate in a turbulent and fast-changing environment which results in that leaders cannot expect bulletproof plans. An agile leader sets up goals and frameworks so that the everyday work will run as efficiently as possible (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001). The agile methodology was created in the software development industry, where creation and creativity are central. However, agile as a management innovation has existed since 1990's and agile methods, such as lean, appeared as early as in the 1950's. In agile methods, a lot of attention is given to create space for creativity (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001). Because of this, agile methods often have a semi-structured framework where members have the freedom to test and explore in a more chaotic and flexible environment, within the given structures the boss/leader sets (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001). In order for the procedure to run smoothly, the organization and the leaders need to trust the members of the team to do their job. Therefore, the agile methods have been developed in such a way so that the procedure can be adapted to the members, instead of having a standardized process and structure, which leaves little space for that team's unique strengths (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001). De Luca emphasize: "*No process makes up for lack of talent and skill*", in Highsmith and Cockburn's (2001) article, which is one of the main points they are trying to make.

When programming became more complex and more extensive, project management had to adapt. One person has limited knowledge and abilities and can often not produce all the code necessary for a program to function at a competitive level (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001). In agile teams a lot of focus is on cooperation and frequently testing the product to give constructive criticism (ibid., 2001). The opportunity to learn from each other during the process arises, as well as giving the customer an opportunity to give feedback on the existing material (ibid., 2001). Agile methods do not intend to abandon structure and rules and let the team members run new project whenever they feel like it, agile methods want to combine flexibility and structure in order to promote creation and adaptation to the fast pace of change which identifies today's society (ibid., 2001). The technology and techniques which are relevant and important today, may be outdated and redundant the next, and if the team is then bound by a strict plan, they will not be able to adapt to these changes. Agile approaches do not, contrary to popular belief, provide higher quality in shorter time, but rather more relevant products when they hit the market.

1.4.1 The Agile Context and Other Methods

Janes and Succi (2012), argue that all existing methods such as agile, waterfall and scientific management have a context where they belong. If they do not fit in a certain context, they should not be adopted there. Agile approaches belong in the complex environment and can be highly efficient in complex situations (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001; Jackson, 2012). Unlike waterfall approach, which divides the project into different parts, and one does not move on to the next part of the plan until the previous is finished. Usually, within waterfall, people have to stick to a plan and budget. Contrary to what many might believe, agile is not the one solution but rather one, among many, born methods of the current state of mind of society.

Adding to this, there are many strategies and methods which are similar, or almost identical, to agile. One example is *Post-bureaucracy*, which Grey (2008) defines by three principles: rules are replaced with consensus, responsibility is based on competence rather than hierarchy, and organizations are open in the regard that employees no longer have a lifelong employment but rather come and go in a flexible way. Another example is *servant leadership* where the purpose of the leader is to serve its employees. In servant leadership, leaders share their power with their employees and focus on helping them develop and put their needs first (Greenleaf, 2015). Last of all is *trust based leadership*, which is a way of working and a culture, focusing on the core values of the organization and the needs of their customers. Every level of the organization with the power of making a decision, aim to promote cooperation, a holistic perspective, build relationships based on trust and ensure integrity, competence and willingness to help others (Tillitsdelegationen, 2018). Out of all of these, agile seem to be the one which have been adopted the most in our society, it can be argued that it is already a management fashion (Bort, 1995; Abrahamson, 1996).

Chapter 2

THEORY

2.1 Institutional Theory

Meyer and Rowan (1977) explain how myths create socially accepted rules, which organizations then choose to follow by creating formal structures. Once these myths are fully institutionalized, they become institutionalized rules which are then taken for granted by society and are often supported by either public opinion or the law.

Myths are for example seen as products, policies, department, organizational activities and services in society, such as organizations issuing certifications. They create new opportunities for organizations. For example, organization can create formal structures to incorporate the myths and do this by expanding their business with new departments, e.g. sustainability departments or create new titles, such as agile manager (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Moreover, Meyer and Rowan (1977) along with DiMaggio and Powell (1983) discuss the importance of isomorphism and the different forms of it. The one consultants and experts are most present in is mimetic isomorphism, which means that organizations try to copy, intentionally or unintentionally, other organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). They usually copy activities and structures proven successful for a particular organization or industry (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), with no actual proof that the activities work outside of that industry. Mimetic isomorphism is often used to deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, and both of these are now a frequent visitor at various organizations because of turbulence seen in society (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The reason organizations incorporate the new myths are either to become or stay legitimate, thus ensuring their survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). One of the main reason's organizations become legitimate by incorporating the myths are that organizations become more isomorphic with each other (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Organizations in the same institutional environment evolve a language, becoming even more isomorphic with each other. Thus, buffering them from the turbulence and uncertainty in society. The language creates a way for organizations to formulate their goals and processes in line with the common institutionalized myths and communicate with each other without the need to question or define particular tasks, positions or processes (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Moreover, myths which are rationalized have the possibility to spread quickly due to its organizing potential (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A rationalized myth is usually controlled, inspected and highly institutionalized (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The myths are important since they can redefine existing rules within organizations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Due to the myths' rationality, it is important and easy for an organization to copy it and create formal structure based of it.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) discuss the processes which contribute to creating rationalized myths, all of which involve the organization's interaction with its environment. One process talks about the complexity of the organization's environment and how a high interdependence within the organizational field creates rationalized myths. The more technologically developed a society is, the more complex and interdependent does the institutionalized environment become (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). By operating in an interdependent environment in which the organizations are similar, it is easier to copy and generalize myths (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). If the myths integrate into society, it becomes necessary, or favorable, for the organization to incorporate them into their formal structure so they do not seem negligent or careless. The second process highlights the fact that most myths arise from a particular organization's activities but is later diffused as it is copied and spread to other organizations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, the rationalized myth remains legitimate due to an underlying belief that the myth is effective.

Additionally, even if the organization does not have the necessary technical activities, the mere ceremonial adoption of the myths will be enough to give them the legitimacy necessary to keep their relationships stable, get more resources if necessary and engage their workers (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The reason for this is because it is more about legitimacy than efficiency. Organizations are willing to adopt the new innovation or fashion, due to the belief that it is efficient (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Rationalized myths, isomorphism, language, legitimacy reasons and diffusion will help this study to further understand how agile approaches have had such a rapid spread across industries, without any actual proof of its positive effects within other industries than software development. Also, these terms will later be combined with management fashion.

2.2 Management Fashion

Within management fashion there are many theories and definitions all with the same aim, to “*heal various organizational maladies*” (Bort, 1995, p.35). The following chapter will start off by exploring the terms management idea and management innovation, focusing on the process of management fashion, based on Abrahamson's (1996) four stages for a management idea to become a management fashion, to further explain the proliferation of a fashion.

2.2.1 The Process

Abrahamson (1996) divides the management fashion process into four stages; *creation, selection, processing, dissemination*. In the first creation stage, an idea is born. A management idea is a technical activity performed by the organization and generally arises when an organization is trying to find a solution to a problem, typically within a specific context (Bort, 1995). Therefore, the creation stage is not the creation of the fashion but rather the notion of the management ideas existence. It can either be a new idea, or a redesign of an old one (Abrahamson, 1996). The idea then becomes a management innovation. For a management idea to be classified as a management innovation, the idea must only be different from existing praxis (Abrahamson, 1996).

Next, innovations are spread by good rhetoric's and through media, gurus and consultants (Bort, 1995). They are the ones who then, in the *selection* stage, choose among these management innovations. The guru's, consultants and coaches are what Abrahamson (1996) refers to as fashion setters. The selection stage is based on two criteria: the fashion setters identify a growing demand to satisfy, or they create and shape a demand based on their followers needs and preferences (Abrahamson, 1996). Røvik (2011) on the other hand, thinks that active hosts play a larger role in spreading the fashion. The active host means managers who are active in adopting and spreading management ideas and innovations, rather than being passive agents who are the source of inspiration for fashion setters (Røvik, 2011; Abrahamson, 1996). The managers often have more to do with which management ideas are spread than fashion setters because the managers interact with a broad network and are actively seeking out new methods in order to stay up to date and legitimate (Røvik, 2011). However, Abrahamson (1996, p.266) also claims that "*virtually nothing is known about the selection stage of management fashion supply.*". Therefore, the study focuses mainly on the third stage, *processing* along with the fourth stage, *dissemination*.

The next stage of the management fashion process is processing the management innovation. Here the fashion setters develop a rhetoric which will create a belief that this management innovation is a rational and groundbreaking idea and this belief will help spread it (Abrahamson, 1996). However, the original context of a fashion has often already formed a specific language and shaped the meaning of terms and technical activities. Therefore, it needs to be diffused accordingly with the help of rhetoric in order to be applicable in new contexts (Abrahamson, 1996; Bort, 1995).

Additionally, managers are usually most impressionable to fashions in times when they are disappointed. The fashion spreads by allowing the belief that the innovation will help the managers attain a desirable goal for which the fashion is the most efficient method (Abrahamson, 1996). The rhetoric is important in order to formulate the essence of attaining this goal as well as the efficiency of the management innovation. Strange et al., (2014) argues that consultants and guru's, unlike Abrahamson (1996), are rational agents who seek a way to great success.

Furthermore, the role of popular media in creating the language has been debated. A few arguments lifted through popular media in order to increase faith in the management innovation are the following: semi-theoretical statements which some successful companies have used, expressing how the innovation can decrease performance gaps or

empirical evidence and scientific studies used to underscore the efficiency of the method (Abrahamson, 1996). O'Shea and Madigan (1977) remark:

Get an article in the Harvard Business Review, pump it up into a book, pray for a best-seller, then market the idea for all it is worth through a consulting firm. (p.198)

After the formation of an appealing rhetoric in the third stage, the fourth stage, dissemination, starts. Popular media plays a huge role in the dissemination of the management innovation as well (Abrahamson, 1996). The dissemination discusses the spread of the created rhetoric.

Different people and different fashion setters use different outlets, but Abrahamson (1996) still stand by the notion that it is the fashion setters who select and spread the innovations without the help of the managers, as Røvik (2011) mentions. The dissemination will eventually lead to the decline of a fashion, meaning the last part of the process when the management innovation is no longer a fashion (Carson et al., 2000; Abrahamson, 1996).

In the study, the processing and dissemination stages of the management fashion process will be seen as interconnected and influencing each other. The appealing rhetoric created will be used in the popular media to further spread the fashion (Abrahamson, 1996). However, the popular media will also contribute to creating and further shape the rhetoric used, in line with what Barley, Meyer and Gash (1988) claim.

2.2.2 What Drives Management Fashion

For the innovation to go through the four stages, there has to be a drive to move it forward. Abrahamson (1996) discusses the technoeconomic forces which compete with the sociopsychology forces in order to form the demand for management innovations. Abrahamson (1996) argues that sociopsychology needs continuously create demand for management fashions. He also points out that “*norms of rationality and progress*” drives this demand for management fashions, because it makes it possible for organizations to maintain an impression of continuous progress (p.271). By applying current management fashions, it satisfies the organizations’ need of uniqueness and simplicity but also the need of following the norms and traditions of society (Abrahamson, 1996).

On the other hand, techno economic forces will create preferences for a certain type of management fashions among managers by changing the environment the organizations operate in. The managers will then look for methods they think are the most efficient in closing the performance gap created by the environmental change (Abrahamson, 1996). Furthermore, depending on the economic state where organizations operate in, and the macroeconomic changes, the fashion setters will suggest different courses of action, thus shaping the demand of new fashions (Abrahamson, 1996). Lillrank (1995) explains that the process could be demand-driven or supply-driven. Abrahamson (1996) discusses the notion that unsolvable problems and contradictions within the organization causes demand for certain management fashions to shift depending on what problem the organization wants to focus on. Both Abrahamson (1996) and Lillrank (1995) agree on that a demand-driven approach is solving problems, while the supply-driven is asking questions and understanding the context.

Abrahamson (1996) argues that if there is an unmet demand among managers and organizations, then more innovations meeting the same demand will spread as fashions. But only if they complete the stages of creation, selection, processing and disseminating through fashion setters first. This study is focusing on demand-driven management fashions.

2.3 Management Fashion and Institutional Theory

Volberda et al. (2014) connects management fashion to the institutionalism by arguing that innovations can become established without any evidence of its efficiency through isomorphic behavior. Organizations adopt these innovations symbolically to increase their legitimacy (Volberda et al., 2014). Organizations' adoption of a fashion will further legitimize the fashion due to it being more recognized and the fashion becoming more widespread.

As fashion setters identify a demand and develop a rhetoric and create a demand for the management innovation (Abrahamson, 1996; Røvik, 2011), it is sometimes necessary to decontextualize and (re)decontextualize the innovation for it to fit into another organizational field (Bort, 1995; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Or, organizations contextualize the innovation for it to fit in another organization. After the innovation is decontextualized it needs to be diffused in order to be (re)decontextualized in another context. The diffusion is the processes which detaches the management innovation from the original context and enables the innovation to be adapted by new organizations and have the potential to later become a rationalized myth. Rationalized myths spread quick because they have much organizing potential (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In other words, they create a lot of opportunities for organizations to gain legitimacy and act as if they know what they are doing.

Moreover, by announcing a plan for change, the organization also admits that its current structure is not valid enough (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Therefore, if the organization already implemented the fashion and it proves to be inefficient it is more difficult to replace the fashion (c.f. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Volberda et al., 2014). This can cause organizations to double-down or expand on the current fashions instead of developing new ones, thus diffusing it further until only the core values remain or the mere belief of its efficiency is all left standing (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Furthermore, language is part of the rhetoric, however the two are not interchangeable. The language is something more tangible and with a somewhat clearer definition, while a rhetoric is not so much the specific words but rather how people talk about the fashion, the atmosphere surrounding e.g. agile approaches (c.f. Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Abrahamson, 1996). Rhetoric is essential for the proliferation of a fashion in the sense that it makes the whole movement seem rational, modern and efficient. As a fashion is institutionalized and myths are created in form of certificates and job titles, language is essential to give a name to all the new aspects of the fashion and creating a common understanding.

2.4 Agility in a Management Fashion and Institutional Theory Perspective

In accordance with what is presented above will the following section present the background to why an agile approach is seen as a management fashion in this study, further known as the agile fashion.

When the agile manifesto was created and the common language began to take form, a basis for the agile approach outside of the software development industry was created. Since this

study is focusing on the adoption of agile outside of software industry, the invention of the agile manifesto will be seen as the creation stage. In other words, the first of the four stages in the process for the agile approach to become a fashion. The agile manifesto could be seen as a specific document which the fashion setters “discover”. Due to agile approaches’ efficiency within the software development industry (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001) did it reach stage two of the management fashion process and was selected by the fashion setters.

In the third stage, processing (Abrahamson, 1996), the agile manifesto is abstracted in order to make it fit into other areas, organizations and new institutionalized environments (c.f. Lillrank, 1995, Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, in order to successfully contextualize the agile approach, they need to have convincing rhetoric (c.f. Bort, 1995; Abrahamson, 1996).

Furthermore, the rationalization of a fashion during the processing stage is important because once a fashion is institutionalized to be rational, the possibility to organize and implement the fashion is basically limitless (c.f. Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Meyer and Rowan (1977) explain myths and their power to shape organizational landscapes and create formal organizational structures. By becoming isomorphic with the myth of the agile approach, organizations create legitimacy towards the environment and increase their chances of survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the dissemination stage, fashion setters contextualize the manifesto and implement it in a new environment, creating the agile fashion.

Even though formal products, policies and departments function as myths, does not mean they help the organization become more efficient, quite the opposite, they often make the organization less efficient (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). However, it can be a way for the organization to show that they follow in the “fashion” and the new organizational norms and in this way create legitimacy (Ibid., 1977). The mere ceremonial adoption of agile approaches and the surrounding myths will be enough to give organizations the legitimacy necessary to keep their relationships stable and get more resources (c.f. Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology focuses on how we view the world. There are, roughly speaking, two different branches in ontology, objectivism and constructionism. Objectivism believes that the world exists without us observing it, there is an objective truth. However, this study has taken another ontological position – constructionism. In other words, this means that the world cannot exist independent of people’s experiences and that it is impossible to get a true or objective knowledge of objects or situations (Patel & Davidson, 2011). Management fashion theory is built upon the faith that activities are produced through social actors. Everything that happens is because people believe it is the best way, since many others have done it that way. A clear example of how Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 21) defines constructivism; “...*social phenomena and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision*”. The patterns which creates a management fashion is constantly being evaluated and, in the end, a new fashion has been invented.

Epistemology discusses how knowledge about the world is obtained by people and is the study of the nature of knowledge. There are two different stances on where knowledge comes from, through positivism or interpretivism. Positivism believes that the knowledge we obtain is strongly connected to our reasoning. Humans are born with certain abilities, e.g. language, logic reasoning etc. and these give our experiences meaning. Interpretivism, on the other hand, means we obtain knowledge through our senses and our experiences. Previous experiences shape and effect what we focus on in the future. This way the knowledge we obtain throughout life gets its meaning through our previous experiences and interpretations (Patel & Davidson, 2011). This study assumes that knowledge can be obtained through the senses and that there is a subjective truth. We perceive and interpret the world through our senses and do not present any objective truth about the topic of agile and management fashions, but an interpretation. In this study the theories related to agile have been compared to the respondents’ subjective view on the agile approaches and then a subjective interpretation was made with the help of chosen grounded theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The conclusion and discussion presented below is the result of these subjective interpretations.

3.2 Trustworthiness

Credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability are considered throughout the study, each one with more focus depending on which section of the study is carried out (c.f. Shenton, 2004). The following method is carefully outlined in order to ensure the reader of the quality of the study.

Credibility is considered in order to ensure that the results of the study are credible and of high quality (Shenton, 2004). It is of particular focus in the data collection where richness of data is valuable and that the results are correctly interpreted and represent what the

participants intended. The study will then be more valuable in the contribution to the literature and understanding of the agile approach.

Dependability is mostly considered during the presentation of the methodology in order to ensure that other researchers can replicate the study and can compare the results (Shenton, 2004). Focus here is to ensure that changes in decisions and circumstances are accounted for and presented in the method.

Transferability is well-thought-out throughout the study, trying to explain and guide the reader through the sections of the study (c.f. Shenton, 2004). The study wants to ensure that the reader understands in which situations the study could be applicable and when the study could help bring further understanding of either the literature or the phenomenon studied.

Confirmability is considered throughout the study to ensure the quality of the conclusion. It has high focus during the analysis and is dependent on the credibility of the data.

Confirmability is also reliant on the dependability of the study in order for the reader to be able to identify possible researcher biases and be able to identify unique perspectives of the study (Shenton, 2004).

3.3 Research Design

The researchers aim to maintain a critical stance towards the agile approaches and its proliferation is a researcher bias worth considering since it could influence the analysis of the data collected (Denscombe, 2014; Bryman & Bell, 2011). The researchers were critical toward the agile approach; however, further research about the agile methodology, management fashion theory and institutional theory was made in order to decrease researcher bias and enable the analysis to be based on the data collected and theories presented above. Considering that the aim of the study is to examine why organizations choose to adopt an agile approach, a critical stance on agile might be beneficial for the analysis to help bring a more nuanced view of the agile fashion and what it entails instead of trusting the belief of its efficiency.

3.3.1 A Qualitative Research Strategy

The study is a qualitative research study, based on semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data, management fashion theory is used as a middle range theory and institutional theory as a macro theory. Management is chosen to easier describe and understand the spread of agile. There are divided opinions whether an agile approach could be seen as a management fashion or not. In the theory chapter, there is an explanation to why agile approaches, in the study, is considered a management fashion. From this, a qualitative description of the agile fashion is presented, and then connected to institutional theory and management fashion to address the following question;

- Why do organizations choose to adopt an agile approach?

A quantitative approach through surveys was considered in order to get a wider and statistically significant response, however a qualitative research approach made it possible to

interpret and analyze the thoughts from people who believes in the agile approach and get a better understanding of a fairly diffuse phenomenon.

According to Lind (2014) and Bryman and Bell (2011), qualitative data often provides a more multidimensional and recent description of the phenomenon being studied and since agile is a current topic with a lot of branches a wider understanding of the phenomenon and the different branches will be possible to discover through a qualitative method.

3.3.2 A Descriptive Exploratory Research Purpose

To link the agile approach with institutional theory and management fashion, an exploratory approach was used. An exploratory approach does not estimate based on theory, but specifies the concept of interest, in this case agile (Cram & Newell, 2016). Research on earlier management fashion theories help identify what specify a management fashion and compared these with factors of the agile approach.

Although, an exploratory approach is mainly used in the study, a clear description of the result is presented in the discussion. The interviews were recorded and quantified in order to develop a more detailed and nuanced picture of the agile fashion. Since the study is based on an exploratory research approach a discussion and suggestions on future research will be presented.

3.4 Data Collection

Bryman and Bell (2011) argue that one of the biggest challenges with a qualitative method is the large amounts of data gathered, which can be difficult to sort and analyze. To handle mentioned challenge, Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) writes that the best way to mitigate the degree of low credibility and legitimacy is through carefully selected data collection methods. Another way to handle the amount of data collected is through a thematic analysis. The study has been broken down into themes, supported by the empirical evidence collected. Moreover, data triangulation is often used but was deemed unnecessary for the study because the information gathered are opinions and thought, and policies or other documents would not give the depth and the personal perspective the study aim to map.

3.4.1 Selection of Organization and Respondents

The exploratory purpose of this study, *to map principles the agile approach rest upon*, in order to answer the research question, makes it essential to choose appropriate respondents. The selection of the respondents was mainly based on suitability. The reason for using suitability selection was to localize relevant companies and participants with knowledge of agile approaches that could contribute to the research question (c.f. Saunders & Lewis, 2012).

Furthermore, the study had a limited time frame but because agile is a current topic and could be sensitive to changes in the discourse (c.f. Abrahamson, 1996) it was beneficial to conclude the study in a short period of time. The study also had a limited budget. Denscombe (2014) points out that when planning face-to-face interviews, it is important to have costs and travel

time in mind. Therefore, geographical location was limited to Gothenburg to give a higher transferability within the area. Adding to why suitability selection was the most efficient and relevant method of selection for the study (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Adding to this, Denscombe (2014) emphasizes that it is not necessary to contact or interview people if there are no strong beliefs that you will get in contact with relevant people, which is why candidates were selected through background checks, which will be further explained below.

Initial contact with the respondents were made face-to-face or by mail. The people contacted, could in turn, refer to other more relevant people, both internally and externally, who were then checked to see if they were suited for the study, and if so, included. The inclusion of snowball selection made it possible to establish contact with several different companies and people, in a short time (c.f. Bryman & Bell, 2011). Respondents were also contacted through events hosted in the agile community in Gothenburg. After ten interviews the essence of the agile community was saturated for the scope of the study. According to Stake (1995), the choice of people should be based on expected learning from them. It was therefore a requirement that the chosen respondents of the study had an idea of agile as a concept and what it could mean in practice. The respondents had to either work or express that they use or sell an agile approach.

One way to receive a deeper analysis is to choose respondents from different hierarchical levels, departments, functions and geographical areas within different organization (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The respondents' backgrounds were important to deepen and broaden the knowledge of the agile fashion and its practical meaning. In the study, the respondents' business profiles and background were reviewed before initial contact was taken with people from different levels in different organizations. The variety of positions give the study a more nuanced view (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). However, it does not go into the depth of any specific profession or position's view of the agile approach. The study rather gets its credibility from the wider selection of participants to see how the view of agile is consistent or different in the various positions.

The number of respondents' and their positions and titles were as follows: six consultants, two programmers from agile teams, and two product owners for agile teams. Several of the respondents had additional titles such as agile coach and scrum master. Six different organizations participated. One software development organizations, one industrial organization, three consultant firms and one representative of an agile organization. The largest organization which participated was the industrial organization in which the respondents came from a smaller software development department.

Furthermore, the study mainly focused on interviewing consultants such as agile coaches because they are considered fashion setters (Abrahamson, 1996) and have the possibility to influence organizations. Additionally, since the consultants work in several different industries it gives them more insight and can provide a wider perspective on agile approaches in various industries. Examples on industries the consultants have worked in are public sector, automobile, food and IT industry.

3.4.2 Before the Interviews

An interview guide was established before the interviews were held. Themes were used in the interview guide to ensure its reliability and to help guide the interviews so relevant questions were asked in order to provide higher credibility (c.f. Bryman & Bell, 2011) and to later be able to compare and analyze them. The questions asked concerned important themes in the agile approach and such as flexibility and responding to change, but also issues that can be linked to institutional theory and management fashion theory.

Furthermore, the interview's specific themes were for example respondent's agile background, respondent's personal definition and view of agile, which were consistent throughout all interviews, as well as, others which emerged throughout the process, such as agile mindset, its legitimacy and the people factor. In between the interviews, the questions were reformulated, and more interviews were held to get more precise answers and better answer the research question. The addition of new themes resulted in more relevant answers considering the research question, why do organizations choose to adopt an agile approach? The first respondents did not get the opportunity to respond to the new themes as enough respondents were interviewed after the changes to saturate the theme.

The interviews were adapted to the respondents in order to ensure they talked about topics and aspects of the organization they had relevant knowledge about. Respondents who did not work as consultants were asked more specific questions about their teams and broader questions about the organization as a whole and its higher management, focusing on their opinions. The consultants were asked mostly about their customers, few questions concerned the consultant firms themselves.

Considering the limited resources which usually exist when conducting a study, a strength with interviews is that little equipment and resources are needed, the only equipment necessary was a recorder and computers. With the respondents' consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The recorder was discretely placed on the table during small talk to avoid the starting of the recorder to affect the overall atmosphere and formality of the interview (Denscombe, 2014). Additionally, as semi-structured interviews provide flexibility, they make it possible to change questions in order to make the most of each interview based on who the respondent is and what their individual experiences and views are (Denscombe, 2014).

3.4.3 Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen to get valuable insight about how the people within the agile community think and reason concerning agility. In-depth interviews help further the understanding regarding the respondents' priorities and what it is about the topic studied which is important to them personally, and since this study is interested in the agents who spread and believe in agile, this was imperative (Denscombe, 2014). Semi-structured interviews also provide detailed data with depth and the possibility to ask follow-up questions to truly understand what the respondents' want to have said, plus they can develop and explain their thoughts (Denscombe, 2014).

Moreover, in a qualitative approach, it is important to point out that the descriptions made are dependent on the study's starting point and the respondents' understanding of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Lind, 2014). Therefore, the respondents were informed about the background of the researchers, students at a local business school and the purpose of the study, which is to map out the beliefs and thoughts concerning agile approaches and then analyze the answer through the perspective of management fashion theory and institutional theory. Moreover, the research method of interviews is not bullet proof and there is no guarantee that the respondents are telling the truth (Denscombe, 2014). The study works from the assumption that they are telling their truth to the best of their ability and since the study's aim for mapping out the existing opinions and views regarding agile, this is a strength for the study.

3.4.4 During the Interviews

Lind (2014) describes that interviews can take place in both oral and written form. The interviews were conducted orally, at companies' office, coffee house or meet space for professionals, although one interview was conducted over telephone. The interviews lasted for about thirty to seventy minutes, with strong documentation of the context, feelings, gestures and atmosphere to create an authentic, reliable and accurate basis for the analysis (Lind, 2014). Interviews were held in Swedish, the respondents' mother tongue, in order to make the respondents feel comfortable and unlimited by choice of words. However, many of the respondents used English words to explain aspects of the agile approaches. Bryman and Bell (2011) and Temple (2008), argues that translating quotes into another language might be difficult, the respondents could feel misinterpreted and feel that it is not their words anymore. To minimize the risk of this, an identification of the essence in what the respondents said was done to later translate it into English with the meaning of the sentence intact.

Alongside with the interviews, further literary research was conducted to deepen the knowledge about the theories to get even more out of the next interview. This contributed to relevant and interesting perspectives which worked as a basis for the interviews held later in order to gain further depth in the questions. Due to the fact that the study uses a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews where original themes remain, the opportunity to go deeper into interesting issues that arise both during the interviews but also during the research exist (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.5 Analysis

3.5.1 Transcribing Qualitative Data

Transcribing is very time consuming (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Lind, 2014). As previously mentioned, the study has a limited time frame and five interviews deemed representative for the selection were transcribed. Remaining five interviews were summarized and useful quotes were taken out. There are many benefits of transcribing, it could help limit the intuitive filter when listening to people, result in a deeper analysis and allows repetitive evaluation of the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The transcribed and representative quotes are presented in the result chapter of the study to get a clearer overview of the respondents' answers. Another way of presenting the data is integrating it into the analysis or using fewer quotes and

discussing how these are representative. However, to show the consistency of the answers within the agile community more quotes are included, which also contributes to a higher confirmability of the findings (c.f. Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.6 Qualitative Data Analysis

The purpose of analyzing data is to gain a deeper understanding of what is being said and contribute to the literature with a new perspective. A study can aim to describe, explain, or interpret the empirical data collected (Denscombe, 2014). This study aims to interpret the data to understand why the agile approach is spreading. The analysis was carried out in stages including interpreting the interviews to get relevant themes and identify essential meanings (Denscombe, 2014). Important sentences and quotes were selected on the basis of how representative they were of the text and from these the themes were created. Themes that emerged were questioned and compared to the study's purpose to be assure of the accuracy of the study and that it focuses on the phenomenon intended to study (c.f. Denscombe, 2014). The chosen sentences were interpreted to be used as a base for the analysis with the perspective of institutional theory along with the themes that have been extracted from the text. Furthermore, quotes were used to give the study more authenticity and legitimacy (Lind, 2014).

3.7 Ethical considerations

To ensure that no one is harmed physically or psychologically, or damage is done to the respondents' integrity due to the study being published, some of the data collected, which was considered sensitive, was excluded from the results. However, none of the information excluded was relevant to the conclusion of the study or other measures would have been taken in order to be able to include such information, such as fake names, to ensure the study's confirmability. Furthermore, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study. The respondents were also offered anonymity, both externally and internally, in order for the respondents to feel that they could talk freely and have the opportunity to delete statements and withdraw from the study (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

The reference system used to identify the respondents in the results section is as follows:
R1, R5, R8, R9 – people working according to an agile approach in their everyday activities.
R2, R3, R4, R6, R7, R10 – consultants and/or agile coaches.

It is not specified the specific position the respondents have since they were promised external and internal anonymity. For example, there is only two product owners from the same company, therefore specifying that would enable them to identify one another.

3.8 Delimitations

The scope of the study is limited but will bring meaningful insight into the agile fashion and its proliferation. The study has chosen to focus on the variation of participants rather than in-depth in one profession, discussed above. It has also limited the geographical area and time

frame, which will ensure better transferability within the chosen area and more accurate representation of the current state of the agile fashion, in the spring of 2019 (c.f. Denscombe, 2014).

Agile is a wide term and can be studied from many perspectives which focuses on different parts of the phenomenon. The study has chosen to focus on the proliferation in accordance with management fashion process theory and institutional theory. This in order to gain further insight into how these theories can explain current fashions which affect today's working environment. However, the study does not explain the various agile methods and positions, it does not aim to fully map and clarify what an agile approach is. The study does instead aim to map out how people who believe in agile and work or sell agile approaches view agile and what it means to them. Thus, giving a deeper understanding to what an agile approach means to practitioners and fashion setters, as well as clarifying what an agile approach is in the eyes of those who use it.

The theories used are wide and have much research and further developments. The study used Abrahamson's (1996) management fashion process theory and Meyer and Rowan's (1977) institutional theory because both are considered to be important in shaping the discourse of respective theory. More recent research is included in order to provide a more nuanced view of the phenomenon, but the original theories were deemed relevant and brought valuable insight. Therefore, in order to be able to bring meaningful understanding about the phenomenon, the study's theoretical reference was limited to Abrahamson's (1996) management fashion process theory and Meyer and Rowan's (1977) institutional theory.

Since the study aim to understand why organizations choose to adopt agile and how the proliferation of agile could be explained, relevant aspects of the theories chosen for the theoretical framework was selected to be able to ensure the relevance of the analysis, that the study contributes to the literature in a meaningful way and bring valuable insight into agile approaches.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

The study's results are divided into sections based on a keyword and supported by quotes. The quotes are for the reader to further understand how respondents expressed themselves and to deepen the trustworthiness. The titles below contain keywords from the quotes while the word inside the parenthesis are added to further clarify the results presented.

(It is an) Agile Mindset

The respondents are very positive to the agile approach. During the interviews most respondents referred to agile as a mindset. The agile mindset could help organizations solve problems in a complex environment and exists for people with flexible assignments.

Can be used evenly and everywhere. Using agile methods is to constantly evaluate and update. Run a lap, evaluate and then again, until we release the product. (R8)

Agile mindset helps us to be more efficient, optimize and earn more money in a fast-changing environment. (R5)

There, in a complex context, agile is a very good fit. (R6)

Moreover, all respondents' agile knowledge seems to come from experience and an interest in agile approaches. Many of them have a background in software development and have taken much inspiration from there. Several respondents exchange knowledge in closed communities, such as meetups. They get their inspiration from informal sources such as podcasts, books and workshops held by other consultants and agile coaches. Furthermore, some of them test themselves and try to work agile in their organization.

I read a lot, I network, and get lots of different impressions and inputs from lots of different places. (R3)

We test it ourselves. We create new exercises, new courses, blog posts, learn, try. We are being agile. (R4)

Complex (Environment)

The word complex was the word used the most during the interviews. Change was not far behind. Many organizations operate in a complex environment and people are complex beings, according to the respondents, and this is the environment they think the agile approach belongs in, the complex one. Most respondents see a demand for organizations to change in order to stay relevant and in business because of the state of today's society. Additionally, a majority of them think that agile will change when the environment changes and will always be an ongoing process.

If people start acting differently, agile should adjust to this. It is not a clear recipe... it [agile] is going to change, together with people changing. (R2)

Agility will never be finished. (R10)

Agility is not a condition, it's something you are. It's to always change and improve... agile in itself is not a purpose, it's a way of thinking, feeling and exist. (R7)

However, many respondents said that agile is not a “*one-best-solution*” or “*silver bullet*”.

Even though the respondents are convinced of the agile approach's efficiency, they are aware you cannot just implement agile and think all your problems are solved. Active engagement is necessary, which they believe agile enables. They also highlight other benefits of agile such as bringing forward existing problems, come closer to the core purpose of the organization and deal with complex problem, in a complex world.

Moreover, several respondents compare today's society with how it was forty years ago. The respondents claim organizations operate in a faster changing environment than ever before and that it is obvious that agile mindset is a successful way of thinking. Agile works in a complex environment where complex problems exist. And as several respondents put it, “*which organization is not complex today?*”

It is obvious and more of a necessity to work agile today then what it was just forty years ago. Everything goes faster. (R5)

Half of the respondents thought that there are several strategies similar to an agile approach across industries. A discussion on waterfall approach was a repeated theme. Some thought that waterfall strategies gives unsatisfactory results or are inadequate to handle today's problems and this was a reason for using an agile approach instead.

Of course I see similarities with other strategies, there are many different agile methods. Everything is spiral development but quite similar. (R9)

Also, measurement was a topic of discussion in several interviews, mostly concerning that agile is difficult to measure. Within the agile approach one usually evaluates relationships, often through daily communication. Since agile is a lot about transparency then problems and inconsistencies should appear even without the need of using a system of evaluation. Some respondents told us that there are no real tools to measure agile, but hopefully in the future.

At an upper organizational level, if you talk about for example entire departments that may not be typically software development, then it is much more based on a relationship, a feeling that you are discussing and such things. (R3)

(Agile Creates) Legitimacy

Most respondents expressed that many organizations claim that they are agile to receive legitimacy from its environment and a few think some organizations and leaders do not really know what it means to be agile. However, one respondent said that it is explicitly stated in their bylaws that they use agile methods. Nevertheless, all of them agree that there is a misinterpretation of the definition of agile among organizations and that this is spread both inside and outside the agile community.

I would definitely say I'm agile, but I'm against this trend term. It's like people are waking up, saying “wow, we're agile now, look at us!”. (R5)

They do not legitimate themselves towards the company itself, but to the external environment. (R10)

To create the legitimacy for the role of an agile coach and to show how experienced they are, there are tests to take and certifications to receive, two respondents explained. The *Project Management Institute (PMI)* is one of the institutes that certifies within the project management profession where at least two of the respondents have been certified. However, the respondents still agreed that there is a lot of inconsistencies in what being an agile coach actually means and what an agile approach entail.

Furthermore, one respondent admitted that it would much rather prefer working in an organization using agile methods, rather than other methods. However, for the same person it does not actually matter where in the agile transformation the organization is but rather that there is a desire to use an agile approach.

I would much rather work in an agile organization than any other place. (R9)

(Agile will) Exist Forever

According to numerous respondents, all departments in an organization have to be fully aware of what the agile mindset means to them, both in theory and in practice, for it to be successful. However, an agile transformation could start in many ways. Respondents especially emphasized one way of doing it: one unit applies the agile mindset, visualizes its positive effects and then it spreads through the organization from there.

It starts somewhere in the organization where it works, then it spreads and eventually become something universal. (R3)

The statement that agile works in a complex environment could be one reason why respondents state that agile will exist forever. Respondents see agile as a solution to complex problems with a focus on action and they also believe that there will always exist complex problems and a need for quick action.

I think the way of thinking, that in an unpredictable environment; take small steps, evaluate and think about where we are going, what's the next step? In my limited imagination, it should work forever. (R4)

In the agile mindset we accept that we have a complex environment and adapt accordingly. I find it difficult to see that changing. (R7)

Furthermore, when asking respondents if they see agile as something that could last forever some claimed that it will probably be an even greater demand of the agile mindset in the future. It was somehow hard for them to see how agile could ever fade since it is based on responding to change and change will always exist. Rather some respondents saw that it is the organizations which will cease to exist if they do not adopt an agile approach.

The future is an even more complex environment and they will have even greater possibility to work agile, and also, there is still going to be people who make the large decisions. (R2)

If you don't become agile, you won't exist. (R2)

(It Should Be) Obvious

Moreover, in the future, most respondents want agile to become something vital and something obvious, a state of mind. Many believe that all these discussions on what an agile approach is, should not be necessary. There should be no need to convince people to act agile.

Personally, I think we should stop talking about agile, and instead just act and be agile. (R5)

It would be perfect if it was ‘an empty word’. And people would just start acting agile, I wish for that. (R1)

The Agile Mindset Summarized

All respondents were asked how they would define the agile mindset, a term which they often brought up in the interviews. Below is a summary of eleven principles they emphasized. They are summarized in a picture to make it easier for the reader to understand how respondent defines the agile mindset. The size of the words represents how often the word was mentioned in the interviews. The bigger a word is – the more used it was. As presented, ‘complex’ and ‘organization’ were most used.



Figure 1. An illustration of terms used to describe the agile mindset.

Following bullet points are full sentences to further understand their context.

- Transparency within the organization.
- A focus on doing, not only documenting.
- Prioritizing.
- Focus on the people and their need in the organization.
- Cooperation and collaboration.
- Adaptability and flexibility.
- A constant learning and development.
- Fast at meeting new demands. Responding to change.
- Higher customer value.
- A plan to handle complex problems and to act in a complex environment.

Respondents often mentioned the manifesto as a source of inspiration. Even though they focus on different aspect of the manifesto and they develop and adapt it to their situation, they have a sound and stable foundation to fall back on. Also, when asked the same or similar questions respondents tended to use the same language and argue for similar ends, e.g. “*humans are the most important aspect of agile*” (R2) and “*the agile mindset is perfect for us who are flexible*” (R8). The terms mentioned above along with terms such as ‘agile transformation’ was mentioned several times by almost all participants.

Furthermore, there was usually a long pause after asking the question and some respondents even said: “*tough question*” and the replies were long. Indicating that it was an important question but no obvious answer.

Chapter 5

ANALYSIS

In the following chapter a thorough analysis will be given of collected data combined with presented theory. It is divided into sections, based on the results; *Language, Mass Media, Complex environment, Legitimacy, Interdependencies, Formal Structure, Lack of Measurement and Ceremonies, End of Agile* and ending with an *Alternative Interpretation* of the data. The sections illustrate a timeline; from the processing stage to the dissemination stage and further diffusion. Put together, they will answer the research question;

- Why do organizations choose to adopt an agile approach?

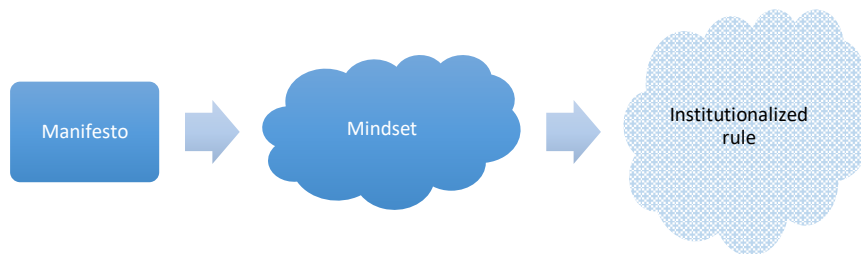


Figure 2. An illustration on agile going from a manifesto to become an institutionalized rule.

Above is an illustration of how agile, or agile methodology, has been processed from being something concrete, precise and known within the software development industry into an abstracted mindset.

The manifesto could be seen as the first stage of creation in management fashion process. The agile manifesto is then diffused by rhetoric and language in the processing stage to become a fashion and later on contextualized in the dissemination stage to fit in the complex environment. As the figure shows, and as management fashion combined with institutional theory indicate, agile approaches could eventually become an institutionalized rule within numerous industries.

5.1 Language

The results showed that people working with agile approaches used the same terms and language. Although the results also displayed different perspectives, colored by participants previous experiences, they shared view of the agile essence and had the same kind of inconsistencies when explaining agile in different contexts. The common perspective and use of the same language with similar, but often diffuse, meaning could help explain why organizations become more isomorphic with each other. People adopt the same language, bridging the knowledge gap with agile terms they all have a vague understanding of or their own definition of. Resulting in a feeling of legitimacy due to the agile language becoming more isomorphic.

Furthermore, the common language helps create legitimacy for those whose job titles are for example ‘agile coaches’ because the results show they seem to accept the title, legitimizing it, even though they are aware of discrepancies between themselves and others in what the title actually means. Therefore, the language ease adoptability and the transfer of agile positions between organizations as well as signaling the value of the agile position, contributing to the adoption of an agile approach.

Additionally, the data present that there are organizations who issue certifications to secure the knowledge of agile coaches. This illustrates how the agile fashion setters try to further legitimize the job title through various certifications and educational programs which will further institutionalize agile approaches. Thus, making the formal organizations who issue the certifications even more necessary (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

5.1.1 Further Diffusion

The results clearly illustrate how people within the agile community explain the agile mindset differently and how they emphasize different parts of it. Giving reason to believe that people in the agile community can focus on different aspects of the agile manifesto, while still drawing on the legitimacy provided by the common rhetoric within the agile community. One might think that rhetoric is going to help people conceptualize the concept of the management fashion but instead it is mainly used to diffuse it (Abrahamson, 1996).

‘Agile methodology’, ‘agile strategy’, ‘agile coach’, ‘agile transformation’, ‘agile methods’, ‘agile fashion’, ‘agile manifesto’, ‘agile mindset’, ‘agile leader’ and ‘agile community’ are just a few terms mentioned in the data or previous studies. Consequently, showing that fashion setters can further develop the agile approach and add new terms and job titles suited for the development of the agile fashion and the situation they wish to contextualize it in. Therefore, the agile fashion and what it means becomes more and more diffuse the more people interact with it, to make it fit it into their specific context.

The results also express that experiences shape the agile mindset. It is an important part to act and teach agile. Moreover, no one or nothing, will probably ever be fully trained in agile. Individual experience could therefore shape what part of the agile manifesto followers develop their thoughts on and spread, again contributing to the diffusion of the agile approach. Therefore, a reasonable conclusion is, if the agile fashion continues to spread it will become more diffuse due to people having the liberty of making it their own. As clear as the manifesto might be, the mindset is not at all as clear. The agile approach, was decontextualized from the pure software methodology, diffused into a mindset, and then contextualized and adopted in other fields and organizations.

5.2 Mass Media

The results show that the agile community get most of their inspiration from mass media or other popular media and they contribute to the same media outlets. Mass-media plays an essential role in the proliferation of the agile fashion and the rhetoric surrounding agile by

creating a forum for finding and sharing knowledge about agile approaches (c.f. Abrahamson, 1996).

As the data shows, the fashion setters; gurus, consultants, agile coaches etc., write books, record podcasts and produce articles for magazines. Popular media is the agile community's source of agile knowledge. The fashion setters, such as the agile coaches interviewed, read each other's work and learn from each other. Thus, spreading and institutionalizing the notion of agile approaches, making an agile approach the norm in their environment (c.f. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Furthermore, the results point out how agile coaches then take the literature, their experiences, the common language and the collective knowledge of agile approaches and use it for educating managers and organizations, helping them adopting an agile approach. The agile community believes in the information they read and spread, and the shared knowledge is reasonably part of the foundation of their unwavering belief in the agile mindset.

To conclude, it can be argued that a strong belief and dedication must exist within the agile community, otherwise there is not anyone to drive the proliferation of agile approaches. Above arguments could be why it is the gurus and agile coaches who are the fashion setters, they are the strongest believers.

5.3 Complex Environment

The data highlighted the benefits of an agile approach to help navigate and deal with a more complex environment and complex problems. One way an organization could be dealing with the uncertainty from their complex environment is by adopting agile approaches through mimetic isomorphism by hiring a consultant. The spread starts somewhere in the organization and the hired consultant will introduce the agile approach as the solution to one department from which it spread. The consultant will then continue to spread and promote agile to more employees, managers and organizations.

Moreover, the data discusses how society becomes more complex and traditional project management strategies, for example the waterfall approach, is no longer efficient. Abrahamson (1996) mentions that the managers are more eager to adopt fashions in times of disappointment, possibly explaining why managers are willing to adopt an agile approach and why agile approaches are spreading so rapidly. Connecting above arguments, managers will be more open to start the agile transformation and adopt an agile approach because current strategies are inadequate to deal with the challenges of today.

5.4 Legitimacy

The rationalization of agile is mainly done through the mentioned language. Furthermore, the data gave the general impression of organizations and people being irrational if they are not agile in today's society. However, according to the data, if your organization fully adopt the agile mindset, your organizations will flourish, you will reap all the rewards of being agile.

Concluding that, as fashion setters develop a rhetoric to make agile seem rational, the likelihood that organizations adopt an agile approach becomes even greater.

5.4.1 Why Adopting Agile is Rational

As today's environment is colored by fast change (Baumann, 2000), the results support that, by adopting an agile mindset the organization meets the demands of today's environment. The term 'agile' in itself could therefore be considered as modern, implying that the organization is adapting and changing according to current trends.

Additionally, the data highlights efficiency in the sense that agile approaches is almost always preferred over a waterfall strategy and other strategies. This is due to its proven positive effects within the software development industry and the manifesto (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001).

Furthermore, the data discusses how implementing an agile approach is rational for organizations in order to meet the demands of the complex environment and be able to produce products which are relevant when they are released. It would be irrational for an organization, according to the results, to have a waterfall strategy due to the fact that the environment the organizations operate in is too volatile and the demands of the customers are shifting too fast.

In conclusion, by rationalizing the agile approach through an appealing rhetoric, making it modern, efficient and rational, fashion setters give the agile fashion an incredible organizing potential because it becomes easy to argue for why the organizations should adopt an agile approach.

5.5 Formal Structure

Part of the results indicated that it does not actually matter where in the agile transformation the organization is, or that the organization follows the framework for the agile method they have chosen to work after. Rather it matters that the organization aims to be agile and have a slightly more agile approach than e.g., a waterfall approach. This shows that the legitimacy the organization gains from adopting the formal structures of agile approaches signals to the environment that they are useful even though there might not be evidence to support this (c.f. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). It is for example more important for the organization to hire agile coaches than that the coaches are actually useful. The legitimacy exists in the fact the agile mindset is an institutionalized management fashion and therefore becomes attractive to implement.

The result shows an agreement on that the term agile, to some extent, was used by companies to create legitimacy towards their surroundings. One of the companies interviewed had in their bylaws that they are supposed to work agile. This is a good example of an organization trying to create legitimacy towards their surroundings, but also trying to create legitimacy internally to engage their employees (c.f. Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In this instance the bylaws function as a myth but are also part of the organization's formal structure. Moreover, the

organizations which are founded in order to certify the scrum masters and validate the knowledge of the agile coaches, such as PMI, as well as the job titles themselves, also function as myths. An example of how myths can redefine organizations' existing rules is how the agile coaches help organizations redefine their work and structures according to agile approaches and myths set up in the organization's institutionalized environment. The process has been mentioned several times in the data and literature and is known as the agile transformation.

5.6 Interdependence

Interdependencies between organizations in the same institutionalized complex environment will require organizations to adapt to the conditions of their buyers and suppliers (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In the results, aspects which slows down the proliferation was lifted. Such as, that the spread of agile in an organization is often hindered by other departments and organizations who does not work according to an agile approach. Therefore, if one major player in the institutionalized environment start their agile transformation, it will require other smaller suppliers to adopt a more agile approach as well, to be able to deliver and meet the demands of their buyer (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Therefore, the technology and daily activities of organizations, the formal structure, will drive isomorphic behavior and put pressure on organizations and departments to adopt an agile approach.

It is not impossible to see an institutionalized environment within which the number of agile organizations eventually reach a tipping point, making an agile approach required. At this point, agile approaches will be highly institutionalized in that particular environment and the proliferation will most likely soon slow down due to most organizations having implemented agile approaches. The software development industry could be seen as such an environment.

5.7 Ceremonies and Lack of Measurement

The results indicate that there are few or no tools to measure the agile mindset or an agile transformation today. Furthermore, even if there is empirical evidence of the efficiency of agile methods within the software development industry, there are little proof of the agile mindset's efficiency. This will hint at the desire to avoid a thorough evaluation or inspection of agile approaches, due to the possibility of this undermining the belief of the agile fashion's efficiency. This in turn, make it easier for organization to implement the formal structure needed to gain the legitimacy they strive for since no one wants to evaluate their agile transformation.

Moreover, the data show an agreement in that there are organizations who try to adopt an agile mindset to get legitimacy, but fail, or do not understand what it actually means. If the organization implement the structures and language correctly according to the necessary regulations for e.g. an agile certification, these formal structures will absorb a lot of the turbulence in society because the organization will maintain the support and the resources it gets from its surroundings. Meaning, it is more important to implement and adopt the ceremonies and technical activates of an agile certificate than actual agile methods.

5.8 End of Agile

The data drew attention to the fact that the agile transformation is never complete because agile means responding to change and society will always keep changing. The essential ‘*quickly*’ was often lost. Nevertheless, by adopting an agile approach then the organizations signal to the world that they are dealing with the turbulence, uncertainty and complexity of today’s society. The legitimacy the organizations strive for, would in the case of the agile approach, exist in the adoption of the agile mindset and embarking on an agile transformation. However, this could be seen as an argument for the everlasting existence of the agile approach and according to the data, there is a belief in the agile mindset’s infinite existence.

In contrast to the never-ending agile transformation, the data show that there is an expressed desire for agile to become an empty word that no one talks about, people just act it. Literature on management fashion theory talks about the decline of a fashion (Carson et al., 2000), in other words the process of it becoming an empty word. However, before this happens, the agile mindset could have a positive impact on how organizations deal with complex problems and this impact could have a lasting effect as well. This happens when a management strategy is accepted by the environment to be reasonable and efficient and it becomes institutionalized to some extent in the organizations and its environment (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This could be seen as the end of the management fashion, when the proliferation has stopped. It is not until agile as a fashion fades, that it can become completely institutionalized. Many of the successful agile techniques could linger for a long time, until no one really knows why they are doing it anymore.

5.9 An Alternative Interpretation

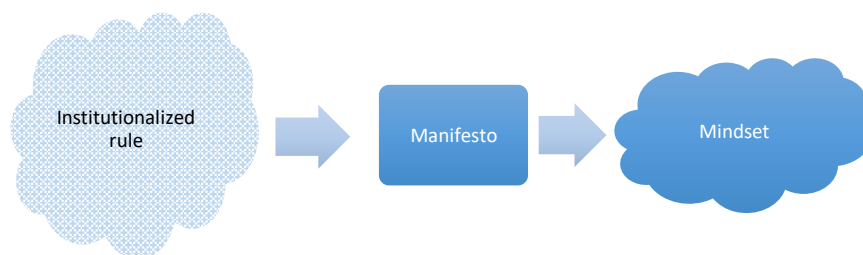


Figure 3. Previous illustration but with and alternative interpretation

Above is the illustration from the beginning of the analysis, but in a different order. The data outlined several management strategies which are similar to the agile approach and points out it is not hard to find a strategy with fundamental principles similar to the agile manifesto. Agile could be seen as part of a new era of strategies created to meet the demand of today’s society and the individuals in it.

There is evidence that agile methodology is a demand-driven strategy (Abrahamson, 1996; Lillrank, 1995; Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001), meaning there will be other strategies and

management innovation which will try and solve the same problems as agile. Strategies mentioned by participants as well as strategies mentioned under the agile approach chapter in this study, are dedicated to do the same thing as agile approaches but in a slightly different manner, e.g. servant-based leadership. They differ in their focus, their origin stories and the organizations for which they were meant to be applied in. Similarities are that they focus on the customer, less bureaucracy and aims to be faster at responding to change in their environment.

Rather than the agile approach being institutionalized, maybe the agile approach is just a way for our species to conceptualize a growing need so we can understand it and be able to implement it into our organizations? Therefore, the “agile strategy” will eventually disappear and new strategies will be invented. Not only due to structural changes in society, but also because the institutionalized rules and myths people live by will change, therefore creating new needs and attitudes.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

The study conducted is of relevance due to the rapid spread of the agile approach through society and companies implementing the strategy with seemingly little knowledge about what it entails (Baumann, 2000). The agile mindset has become a way for organizations to legitimize their existence to their surroundings by adopting the agile approach into their formal structures. Furthermore, management fashion theory discusses how an environmental demand will drive the proliferation of a fashion and there is a demand in today's society for solutions to help organizations deal with complex problems and operate in a complex environment. By examining this demand and the proliferation of agile approaches, the study suggests that organizations choose to adopt an agile mindset due to many different reasons. The study has identified some of them, concluded in the following section.

- Why do organizations choose to adopt an agile approach?

By seeing the agile mindset as a management fashion, it eases the explanation of the rapid spread of agile approaches. Within the software development industry, the adoption happened relatively quick. Due to a common rhetoric and its diffusion, agile coaches choose to believe that the agile mindset is the most efficient and best way to go forth when operating in a complex environment. Also, because the agile community believes that most organizations exist in a complex environment, they view agile as applicable in almost every organization. Since the agile coaches influence organizations and are fashion setters, their belief in agile approaches becomes a reason explaining why organizations adopt an agile approach.

Several steps have been outlined showing how institutional theory and management fashion theory explain why organizations choose to adopt an agile approach. The two critical stages of management fashion process theory, processing and dissemination, were connected to the relevant aspects of institutional theory. Rhetoric and language create the basis for the diffusion, making agile approaches into something organizations actually want and can implement through the rationalization of agile. Finally, the legitimacy the organizations strive for, is achieved when agile is a myth in the organizations institutionalized environment. The legitimacy is maintained through among other things, ceremonial participation and avoidance of demanding measurement and specific results.

However, stating the agile mindset as a fashion also means that the mindset will disappear due to changes in society. The demand of the organizations' environment will shift and there will be a need to update their organizational structure in order to stay relevant. In other words, organizations will have to change and adopt new strategies and mindsets to maintain their legitimacy and thereof, their resources and buffer against turbulence and uncertainty.

Summarizing the study, agile mindset is not a recipe to heal all maladies, it is not a '*silver bullet*' as respondents put it. Adopting the agile mindset, the eleven principles outlined in the results, means that you legitimize an agile mindset and work in a way to handle a complex

environment and fast change. The agile mindset is a management fashion, perfect for the time it exists in, perfect for solving the problems organizations are having with the turbulence and uncertainty it faces, and perhaps, a perfect reflection of today's Western society.

Future Research

Further research on similarities and differences of current management strategies, which are comparable to agile approaches, could deepen the understanding of the institutional environment where different management fashion and strategies arise in. And also explain why they spread in those environments.

Furthermore, a deeper analysis could be done of the characteristics of today's society and the individuals, in order to see how much, it effects the adoption of a management fashion such as agile. This could help contribute to further understanding of the creation and selection stage of the management fashion process theory.

More research within the field of the exact process of diffusion and how rhetoric helps to diffuse the language and rationalize the fashion in order to spread it, could help further the understanding of how the dissemination of a fashion works.

Due to limited resources the study did not include Meyer and Rowan's (1977) decoupling. The study shows evidence of decoupling taking place in order for organizations to gain legitimacy and more research in the degree of implementation of the agile approaches should be conducted.

Moreover, research in order to outline which of the agile methods are used and what language is used in organizations when discussing agile could help to further understand the agile approaches in itself.

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