

Evolution of Agile Practices during a M & A of a European and a Chinese Company

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Abstract

The volatile environment is nothing new, but in the last two years, when the world had to cope with a pandemic, it was the agile companies that were able to survive or even make a profit. More than ever, the business is done through projects and the practices used make the difference between being fast and agile or being a follower. The present work analyzes the presence of agile practices in the context of the merger and acquisition of a European and a Chinese company in Europe. For the assessment of the volatility of companies' environment before and after the merger, the agility assessment framework by Z. Zhang and H. Sharifi will be used. Through the questionnaire filled in by top and middle management as well as operational level employees, it will be evident what level of agility the companies needed before and after the merger to prosper. One level lower, the agility level inside departments will be reviewed with interviews, where the presence of agile practices in projects run before, during and after the merger, using the Agile Adoption Framework - SIDKY Agile Management Index & a 5 Stage implementation process, will be assessed. The research aims to evaluate the gap between the current and the needed level of agility at the country level, as well as the evolution of agile practice in projects during the process of the two companies coming together. In the end, providing the answer to what is the highest possible level of agility the merged company can achieve.

Keywords

Agility, Agile Project Management, Agile Practices, Mergers and Acquisitions, Project-as-Practice

1. Introduction

Constant change, uncertainty and unpredictable environment have always been a challenge for companies (Sharifi & Zhang, 2001; Small & Downey, 1996; Bes-

sant et al., 2002). However, it is the way the companies deal with this constant that makes them stand out and survive (Shams et al., 2021; Sherehiy et al., 2007; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999). In the manufacturing industry, the leading paradigm to overcome volatility is to react quickly, respond to changing demand from the market, deliver high quality, increase productivity and, with optimisation, reduce cost (Cho et al., 1996). There is one other tool frequently used to reduce uncertainty, gaining market share, add new resources, ensure growth, and lead the way to achieving strategic business objectives—mergers and acquisitions (Kumar, 2019; Karst & Johnson, 2021; Sun, 2018; Zhu & Zhu, 2016; Yang & Hyland, 2012; Tallon & Pinsonneault, 2011). So, looking at the companies that went through mergers and acquisitions, what do these companies have in common? They are deemed as “adaptive”, “flexible”, or “agile” (Sherehiy et al., 2007). In the past years, the concept broadened to include the company’s “strategic agility”, “organisational agility”, and “operational agility” (Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Shahrabi, 2012; Weber & Tarba, 2014; Arbussa et al., 2017; Singh & Vinodh, 2017; Morton et al., 2018; Vaillant & Lafuente, 2019; Haider et al., 2021). In essence, agility is the ability to: 1) create a future, 2) anticipate opportunity, 3) adapt quickly and 4) learn always (Ulrich & Yeung, 2019).

Such companies are usually also project-oriented (Tordrup & Engholm, 2022; Lasinska, 2021), performing business development through projects. The more R & D oriented are prone to using the traditional, stage-gate project approach and the more IT or software-oriented use more agile project approach. However, the hard distinction between the two is quickly vanishing, since today, almost all companies rely on IT and software. So, it is no surprise that the traditional project approach and agile project approach have long been on the road to coming together. After the initial decade of the introduction of agile practices, the companies turned to the agile community, asking how best to adopt agile practices (Sidky et al., 2007; Thesing et al., 2021; Javdani Gandomani & Nafchi, 2015). But adopting the correct agile practices next to the traditional ones is not a straightforward process. When companies implement an agile method (Scrum, Extreme Programming, Design Thinking, Kanban...), it is expected that they implement a range of agile practices. An agile practice can be “a technique or a procedure” within a methodology used to manage the project (Gemino et al., 2021) or a “concrete activity” that contributes to the execution of a process (Project Management Institute, 2017; Sidky et al., 2007). Research showed that if companies should implement the whole range of agile practices (from an agile method), it could put too much constrain on the resources and move the focus from value creation (Abbas et al., 2010; Boehm & Turner, 2005; Chow & Cao, 2008; Dyba & Dingsoyr, 2009; Javdani Gandomani et al., 2013; Ahmed & Sidky, 2009; Kurapati et al., 2012).

Surprisingly, even though the term *agility* has been around for more than 30 years (Ulrich & Yeung, 2019), it has been extensively researched, mostly in the field of “software” (Vallon et al., 2018; Inayat et al., 2015; Jovanovic et al., 2020).

Research in other areas of industry, as well as different types of projects, is long overdue (Conforto et al., 2014). More specifically, insight into the area of integrating agile into the stage-gate model is missing (Karlström & Runeson, 2005). Meaning research in [hybrid] approaches to overcome challenges (Cao et al., 2009; Jovanovic et al., 2020) in the volatile environment and the adaptation with the tailoring of use of such approaches in different projects and organisational environments (Cao et al., 2009) is missing.

What has been done, however, is the development of several adoption frameworks, including the company's assessment level of agility readiness and project suitability to use agile practices. Specifically, *on the company level*, Margherita, Sharifi and Caforio (2021) proposed a conceptual framework (based on an extensive literature review and the works of Sherehiy, Karwowski, & Layer, 2007; Wendler, 2013; Dyer et al., 2009; Braunscheidel & Suresh, 2009; Baramichai, Zimmers, & Marangos, 2007; Preiss, Goldman, & Nagel, 1996; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999, 2000, 2001) focusing on Agility Strategy Formulation, Agility Action Implementation and Agility Performance Checking, that would amongst others answer the question "What are the critical factors for a successful agility development effort?" (Margherita et al., 2021). In order to have an opportunity to shift the business toward winning strategies like market opportunity, customer response and creating new, uncontested markets, one needs to include besides Organisational and Strategic agility, Leadership and Individual agility (Ulrich & Yeung, 2019). Furthermore, in multinational organisations, there has been the need to combine strategic agility with the IT infrastructure agility, supply chain and manufacturing operations, as well as use the international joint venture to develop intellectual capital (Shams et al., 2021). In addition, other frameworks were developed to include also *the project level*. Boehm and Turner (2003) proposed a framework rebalancing organisation agility and discipline by introducing the use of the agile methods, the disciplined ones or a mix. They described five axes (size, personnel, dynamism, criticality, and culture factors) used to determine if the project situation is suitable for agile or disciplined methods. And for the team or the organisation, the adoption is actually the circle of practice selection, adapting, assessment, retrospective, and adjustment (Javdani Gandomani & Nafchi, 2015). In addition, it has been shown that it is a stepwise approach that must consider the key stakeholders: customers, developers, suppliers, users and strategic partners (Boehm & Turner, 2003). The stepwise approach is also supported by the Sidky Agile Measurement Index (SAMI) and the Agile adoption and improvement model (AAIM), evaluating the readiness of the organisation, what practices to implement (the to-be-constructed process), what difficulties there can be while adopting, and the needed preparation of an organisation that must go through 5 and in the AAIM model 6 stages (Qumer & Henderson-Sellers, 2008), until it reaches the highest possible level of agility (Sidky, Arthur, & Bohner, 2007; Ahmed & Sidky, 2009). In the end, it is essential that parts are added, modified, or dropped while adopting agile methods, ensur-

ing a fit to the development context, project and organisation (Cao et al., 2009).

In all the research stated by now, it is mostly the western view that is being presented and the mergers and acquisitions in the context of west countries acquiring non-western companies. In the present research, it will be a Chinese manufacturing company taking over a European manufacturing company in Europe, so providing new insight.

During the literature review, it has been evident that Chinese companies participate in the benefits of M & As (Jiang, 2019; Ramasamy & Yeung, 2020) and are more agile and faster to the market than the European (Gordon & Milhaupt, 2019; Rottig & Torres de Oliveira, 2019; Baroncelli & Landoni, 2019; Vecchi, 2019). The researched case confirms this since the European company had predominantly the stage-gate project approach and could not cope with fast-changing market requirements and shortening time to the market. On the other hand, the Chinese company was and still is fast growing, acquiring companies in China and Japan and entering into joint ventures in the US. In the past two years, they managed to apply the acquired knowledge base and technology to shorten the product development cycle, push new technologies to the market and grow the business.

So, the present research will therefore analyze the difference in how a European and a Chinese company coped with the high volatility in the past two years by assessing how the level of agility on the company level changed and, through this, the level of agile practices inside projects in return defining the highest level of agility the merged company can achieve. As the second objective, the research will close the gap in providing insight into areas other than software and analyzing the stage-gate and agile approaches in R & D, sales, marketing, logistics and process projects.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

The research will analyze the gap between the current and the needed level of agility at the company level as well as assess the use of agile practices in projects before and after the merger of two distinct companies. The method used will be a qualitative research approach using an embedded in-depth single case study of a company (Yin, 2018). The case study will be exploratory, descriptive and explanatory in nature (Martinsuo & Huemann, 2021), analyzing the presence of agile and stage-gate practices in projects managed in all three typical phases of the merger: pre-merger, merger, post-merger (DePamphilis, 2019). To cover the whole timeline of agile practice evolution, a retrospective analysis will be used with clear instructions to mitigate the usual high risk of bias (Nelson, 2007). The research will be investigated through observation in a real-life setting, with the particular dynamic taking place (Maylor et al., 2017). As a framework, the Sidky Agile Management Index (Sidky et al., 2007) and Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) ("Achieving Business Agility with SAFe® 5" 2021) will be used. The Sidky Agile

Management Index provides the framework to assess a company's highest level of agility it can achieve by setting the target level of agility on the project level. Next to that, the Agile scaled framework adds the ten underlying principles: economic view, system thinking, variability and preserve options, integrate learning cycles, base milestones on objective evaluation of working systems, reduce batch sizes, apply cadence, unlock intrinsic motivation of workers, decentralise decision making, organise around value (*"Achieving Business Agility with SAFe® 5"* 2021).

2.2. Analysis Method

The research process will be divided into 5 phases from which the first three have already been completed, and the additional two will follow in the next six months: 1) A literature review was conducted to evaluate the state-of-the-art status on the topic of adopting agile practices and finding the latest research in order to build on it, 2) Since we are talking about a corporation, relevant companies with subsidiaries have been selected to participate in the research, 3) Kick-off meeting was organised to inform the management about the research and potential contribution to the company. To be fulfilled: 4) Distribution of surveys to all predefined participants (management, operational people in predefined companies) and 5) Evaluation and presentation of the results.

The process is done in order to answer the main research question:

RQ1: How are agile practices in project management evolving during a merger of 2 companies while combining agile and stage-gate project approach practices?

All information will be obtained from the resources provided by the European Headquarter and 5 European subsidiaries. Emails, presentations, personal documents, notes, meeting minutes, agendas, and reports will be thoroughly analyzed, and the conclusions will be presented in the case study. Analysis of the agility level of both companies before and after the merge will be done via a survey filled in by top and middle management and operational level employees. Level lower, seven departments will be evaluated regarding how agile they are. Through semi-structured interviews ranging from 30 - 90 min., the presence of agile practices in 3 smaller and five middle/major projects across the departments will be compared. All the conversations will be recorded via Teams and transcribed.

3. Discussion

After completing the research, the analyzed data and conclusions should fully and clearly answer the research question. In doing so, it will provide a better understanding of the emergence of agile practices in the stage-gate approach, in the context of mergers and acquisitions, as well as add to the empirical insight into industries other than software.

Also, since the Chinese company is operating in a highly volatile and competi-

tive environment in Asia, it should show that the acquirer uses several agile practices, compared to the use of predominantly stage-gate practices in the European company, which has a smaller distribution volume in a less volatile environment. Hence, it is expected that the combination of agile and stage-gate approaches is a must to survive and thrive as the merged company enters new markets. At the department level, it is expected that agile and/or stage-gate practices are used in regard to the nature of the project (R & D, IT, logistics, marketing, HR, organisation, quality). However, since the research will evaluate feedback from before, during and after the COVID-19 epidemic, the results can be different.

The research is set to achieve the following goals: 1) Evaluate the agility level of separate companies and the newly merged company, assessing if the level of agility is enough for the business environment in which they function, 2) Analyze projects and identify agile practices in different merger phases, 3) Get a deeper insight into the agility adoption process into a stage-gate project approach, 4) Validate the agility adoption framework in the context of mergers and acquisitions and industries other than software, 5) Add to the empirical research in the field of project-as-practice by providing insight into the evolution of the project practice process in a merger context.

The way the research is designed, it is possible to achieve all of them and contribute to practice and science. Especially with the visualisation of the process of the spillover of agile and stage-gate practices in projects during different stages of the merger inside different departments, resulting in a hybrid version (agile and stage-gate) of the project approach in the merged corporation.

4. Conclusion

The use of agile methods in the software industry is almost a standard. However, the transition into other areas like logistic, marketing and HR is on the rise for years. Especially in turbulent times, the agile approach can make a difference between profit and loss. Where some see potential to implement, others have it already in their daily business. This is true for the researched case of the Chinese company taking over the European. A significant role plays the volatility of the environment, and since the Asian environment is more challenging in terms of competition, it requires a higher level of agility to react. Flowing down to the department and project level, the clash of the stage-gate and the agile project management approaches unmistakably create a new, hybrid project management in the merged company.

The presented case offers an insight into the possibility of implementing agile practices in a manufacturing company and that the company will choose only the practices that contribute to value creation and are feasible to implement.

The research can be used as the basis for the merged company to prepare a strategic plan to increase company agility. However, the challenge of changing the mindset will probably be the hardest.

For further research, a multi-case study could be conducted revealing a trend of using agile and stage-gate practices as needed, companies taking the “best of both” in a specific situation or a project.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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