

“Old” Waterfall versus “New” Agile? 15 March 2019 William Siemons

I have to smile when people talk about “Old” waterfall versus “New” Agile, and even more when they talk about “Waterfall” as if it were about a once ominous dark medieval era, where people were not allowed to adjust or deviate from plans, think along, or speak up. And then followed by saying that luckily “Agile” has come to the rescue, freeing people and introducing revolutionary new things such as adjusting plans, short cyclic working, end to end delivery and self-management. As if people really did not think about these things in the past.

The first waterfall method (System Development Methodology) was published in the seventies. A big revision followed mid-eighties. The first agile approaches such as Rapid Application Development (RAD) and eXtreme Programming (XP) emerged as concept papers in the eighties already, but were published formally sometimes up to a decade later. During my computer science study in the eighties, we were having the first debates on pros and cons of the various approaches. We could then only conclude the obvious: Adapt or design an approach to best fit and suit the situation. And also self-management, which is often presented as typical agile, was introduced as early as in 1986 in the automotive industry.

So concepts such as waterfall, agile, self-management are all between 25- 35 year old. Older than the millennium-bug, the euro, the smartphone, the internet (as we know it), and the video CD.

From a management perspective agility is, such as efficiency, effectiveness, quality, durability, robustness and security a non-performance requirement with costs, pros and cons attached to it. And despite labelling it as “agile” organisations have thought, talked and worked on challenges such as flexibility, time to market, end to end delivery, short cyclic development, listening to their customers and experts.

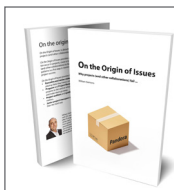
What actually has changed recent years, is that the internet increased the transparency, accessibility

and comparability of competitors in the playing field to their market. This puts pressure on the ability to change at a pace that is equal to, or faster than competitors. To be able to effectively cater for required agility, it is required to understand first and foremost where agility in the business is required (market change, consumer expectations, production demand, competition, law, technology change, staff change). The answer is very likely not a silver bullet, but a tailored and targeted approach.

What people are actually referring to, when talking about “Old waterfall”, has nothing to do with “old” nor “waterfall” and is about the inadvertent side-effects of standardising project management in organisations. Standardising it with standard steps, standard templates and standard reports, aiming to make projects more comparable and more similar to manage. And that is indeed achieved with standardisation, but it has side-effects. Projects often perceive these standards as constraining and cumbersome. Especially for smaller and development projects.

Lesson learned out of this, should be what we already discovered in the eighties: It is better to tailor an approach to fit an individual challenge, than to try fitting each challenge into a single standard approach.

Replacing “Old Waterfall” by “New Agile” as the next internal “standard”, rather than adding and balancing options, seems like replacing a rusty old hammer in a toolbox that was lacking a screwdriver, by a screwdriver, to then have a toolbox that is lacking a hammer.



“On the Origin of Issues” by William Siemons, describes patterns that cause projects (and other collaborations) to fail, including patterns and habits related to practices and hypes. In capita selecta, the history of practices is briefly described, and how practices relate to different types of challenges.