

AGILE PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the question of whether agile project management can contribute to overcoming current challenges in public administration and to what extent successful implementation is possible. The starting point is the observation that administrations are increasingly under pressure to change in the face of growing complexity, uncertainty and the dynamics of a VUCA world (Autenrieth et al. 2024). While agile project management methods such as Scrum are already established in the private sector, their application in the public sector is still in its infancy. In the theoretical part of the thesis, the concept of agile project management is systematically presented and compared with classic project management. Particular attention is paid to the Scrum method as a practical framework. The structure and functioning of public administration is then examined and key challenges such as digitalization, demographic change, skills shortages and innovation bottlenecks are identified. On this basis, the potential that agile project management can contribute to modernization and increased efficiency is analyzed.

Keywords: Scrum, agile project management, public administration, VUCA, motivation.

INTRODUCTION

Despite advancing social and technological developments, attitudes that insist on traditional ways of working are still widespread in many organizations and especially in public administration: "It's the way we've always done it, so why should we change anything?" (Krauss 2025). (Krauss 2025). However, this way of thinking ignores the increasing dynamism, complexity and uncertainty of today's world, which is often described as a VUCA world. The term "VUCA", an acronym for volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, is emblematic of the challenges (Autenrieth 2024) that organizations must face in the 21st century (Busch & Habe 2024).

Companies in the private sector in particular, e.g. banks or the automotive industry, are responding to framework conditions by introducing agile project management methods in order to increase their responsiveness, innovative strength and customer focus (Peters & Schelter 2021). This raises the key question of whether agile project management can also be a suitable response to similar challenges in the public sector. Against this background, this article is dedicated to the central question of the extent to which agile project management can contribute to overcoming current challenges in public administration and whether it is possible to successfully implement corresponding approaches in this context.

In addition to a conceptual definition, a comparison is made with classic project management, supplemented by an introduction to the agile Scrum method (Scrum Alliance 2024). In addition, the special features and structural framework conditions of public administration and the specific

challenges it currently faces are considered. Building on this, the potential and fields of application of agile methods in the administrative environment are considered.

LITERATURE

As agile project management is a complex and multi-faceted employee survey topic area, this article begins with a basic overview of its conceptual and terminological foundations. First, a conceptual classification and definition of the term "agile project management" is provided. This is followed by an outline of the key differences to traditional project management in order to better understand the specific characteristics of agile approaches. In addition, a brief overview is given of the Scrum method as one of the most widespread agile project management methods.

In order to contextualize and better understand the subject of the study, a differentiated consideration of the individual conceptual components "agility", "project" and "management" is also provided. This clarification of terms serves to sharpen the conceptual basis of the work and to situate the subsequent analysis in a theoretically sound manner. A brief definition of each term is provided for clarification purposes:

Agile / Agility	Project	Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast response to changes (HR Works 2024) • the agility of structures and people (Bendel 2023) • is becoming increasingly important (Haufe 2024) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have time, financial and personnel targets for achieving a result (Factro 2024). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a body that represents a leading person • Activities of the company management (Hubspot 2024)

Table1 : Agile project management
Source: Own representation

It can be said that agile project management can be understood as a management and control methodology that enables organizations to act in a flexible, responsive and goal-oriented manner within defined framework conditions, such as time, budget and human resources. It does not represent a complete departure from traditional project management, but rather a supplement or further development that is particularly suitable for dynamic and complex project environments (HR Works 2024).

In current practice, agile project management is becoming increasingly relevant and is establishing itself as an important tool for overcoming modern challenges in projects (Sprintzeal 2024). This approach has its origins in the field of software development and is closely linked to process management (Mooncamp 2024). The literature shows a consistent structure of agile project management concepts, which typically consist of several components that build on each other. These are shown schematically in the following diagram.

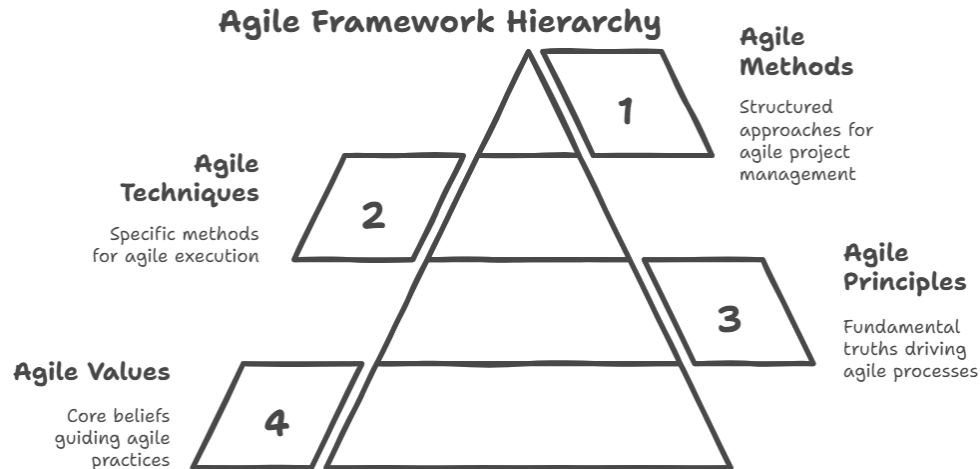


Figure1 : Agile Framework Hierarchy

Source: Own representation

The agile values form the fundamental guiding principle of agile project management and therefore represent the conceptual foundation (Factro 2024). A total of eight central values can be identified, which are organized in four value pairs. Within each of these pairs, one value is prioritized over another without completely negating its fundamental importance. This juxtaposition illustrates the rebalancing of traditional project management paradigms in favor of a more human-centered and adaptable approach (Preußig 2024).

For example, the interaction between individuals is given a higher priority than standardized processes, and the ability to adapt to the situation is prioritized over strictly prescribed plans (IdeeQuadrat 2023). This manifests a fundamental change in perspective that is aimed at flexibility, self-organization and continuous learning.

Another fundamental pillar of agile project management is formed by the twelve principles of the agile manifesto, which supplement the value level with concrete guidelines for action (GPM 2025). These principles include: continuous delivery of software, proactive response to changes in requirements, consistent work rhythm, cross-functional collaboration, promotion of intrinsically motivated individuals, direct communication, focus on functioning products, simple design, self-organization of teams and continuous reflection for process optimization (Asana 2024). Specific agile techniques are used to put these values and principles into practice. These operational tools provide methodological support and enable a flexible and iterative project execution phase. The agile methods form the overarching structural framework that systematizes the aforementioned techniques and embeds them in an application-oriented manner (Preußig 2024). The entirety of this canon of values and methods is often summarized under the term Agile Manifesto (TÜV NORD Akademie GmbH 2024).

Classic versus agile project management

Classic project management represents the historical origin of modern project control (APM 2024). It is based on a linear, phase-based structure in which planning, implementation and control are clearly separated from each other and take place sequentially. A typical methodology within this model is the waterfall method, which is characterized by an intensive planning phase (Kusay-

Merkle 2021). The focus here is on precisely defining and adhering to time, cost, resource and risk parameters (APM 2024).

In contrast, agile project management pursues an iterative and adaptive approach that focuses on flexibility, continuous feedback and dynamic goal adjustment. While in the classic model, project goals are clearly defined at the beginning and not changed over the course of the project, the agile approach formulates target visions that can be further developed and modified over the course of the project (Workamajig 2024). There are also clear differences in terms of team structure: traditional projects follow a hierarchical organization with a clear project manager, whereas agile teams are self-organizing and do not have a formalized leadership role.

Documentation practices also differ significantly. While traditional project management relies on comprehensive documentation, the agile environment aims to reduce documentation to the essentials (Cabrero-Daniel 2024). There is also a conceptual difference in dealing with scope, time and costs: In the classic model, the project scope is fixed and the time and budget are adjusted accordingly. In the agile approach, on the other hand, time and effort are usually fixed (Seng et al. 2024), while the project scope develops incrementally (Haufe 2025). In practice, it has been shown that classic project management is preferred for standardized, low-risk projects, while agile approaches can offer particular advantages for complex, dynamic and innovation-driven projects (PMCC 2025).

Agile method - Scrum

The best-known agile methods include Scrum, Kanban, Extreme Programming (XP), Design Thinking and Lean Startup. Some of these methods combine classic elements with agile principles and differ in terms of objectives, structure and area of application (Budweiser 2024).

This paper focuses on agility, in particular the Scrum method, which is one of the most widely used agile project management frameworks in the world (Wrike 2025). Scrum was developed in the early 1990s by Ken Schwaber and Jeff Sutherland. It is defined as a framework that "supports people, teams and organizations in generating value through adaptive problem solving" (Schwaber 2020).

The Scrum process begins with the collection and prioritization of requirements by the product owner (Scrum Alliance 2024), which are documented in a product backlog (PMCC 2025). From this backlog, the team creates a sprint backlog, which serves as a concrete working basis for a development cycle, the so-called sprint (Scrum Alliance 2024). Each sprint usually lasts between one and four weeks. To manage and communicate within the sprint phase, short daily meetings, known as daily scrums, are held to reflect on the status of work and identify any obstacles (GPM 2025).

The aim of each sprint is to develop an increment, i.e. a functional partial result (PMCC 2025) that meets the customer's requirements (Cabrero-Daniel 2024). Quality assurance is based on the jointly defined Definition of Done, which specifies when a task is considered complete (Preußig 2024). Due to its structure, Scrum promotes transparency, continuous improvement and a high degree of adaptability, which makes it particularly suitable for dynamic and complex project environments.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this article is based on a systematic literature review that focuses on scientific publications from the European Economic Area. The aim is to survey and critically reflect on the current state of research on agile project management - particularly in the context of public administration. The literature consulted is selected on the basis of defined criteria, with the focus on the relevance, methodological quality and topicality of the respective sources.

The analyzed studies and specialist articles are compared as part of a comparative analysis in order to identify key similarities, differences and lines of discussion. The focus here is on the synthesis of content and critical evaluation of existing findings. Primary data collection methods such as interviews, surveys or case studies are deliberately avoided, so that the work has a purely theory-based and descriptive-analytical character.

The scenario on which the analysis is based is tailored to the specific structures and framework conditions of public administration. An ideal-typical application model of agile project management is designed, which exemplifies how corresponding methods could be implemented within public authority processes under optimal conditions. It is taken into account that the transferability to private sector contexts is only possible to a limited extent and that other requirements may be placed on the organizational structure and implementation.

RESULTS

Against the backdrop of increasingly complex social requirements, the question arises as to what extent agile project management can also be a suitable response to current and future challenges for public administrations. While agile methods are increasingly established in the private sector as effective tools for increasing responsiveness, efficiency and innovative strength, the public sector - particularly in Germany - is still at an early stage of development with regard to the application of agile principles (Steinbrecher et al. 2023).

There is no single definition of public administration; rather, it should be understood as a multi-layered, heterogeneous system that encompasses a wide range of tasks and responsibilities (Bogumil 2024). The central functions of the administration consist of contact with citizens and the provision of public services, for example in the form of registration, social infrastructure or cultural offerings (BBK 2024). In organizational terms, the administration is usually made up of several offices, departments and an administrative management. It is embedded in a federal state structure and local self-government (Tietmeyer & Seng 2024). The framework for administrative action is determined in particular by political and legal requirements (BMI 2024). Financing is mainly provided by tax revenues, levies and fees. The goal of maximizing the common good is at the center of administrative policy action (BBK 2024), whereby monetary objectives are subordinate to social and non-monetary objectives (BMI 2024).

Although the concept of agility has hardly been anchored in the administrative sector to date, there is a growing interest in flexible and adaptable management models. An empirical survey of public administration employees showed that the principle of agility is often perceived as contradictory to the traditional values of stability, security and hierarchy (Seng et al. 2024). These structural and cultural imprints have so far made it difficult to establish agile ways of thinking and acting (Acatech 2024).

Another obstacle is the lack of competitive pressure from public institutions, which significantly reduces incentives for innovation compared to the private sector (Dietrich et al. 2024). As a result, there is often a lack of impetus for strategic development and reflection on existing administrative practices (Bundeskartellamt 2024). Nevertheless, public administration is not exempt from the effects of the VUCA world, i.e. volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. In addition to these transformation processes affecting society as a whole, there are many other challenges that administrations must face, including

- Digitalization and digital transformation (Kommunal Campus 2024)
- Sustainability and decarbonization (Markus & Meuche 2022)
- Technological modernization backlog (Bensberg et al. 2024)
- Staff shortage, especially in the IT sector
- Uncertainties and institutional ambiguities (Richenhagen & Dick 2022)
- Demographic change (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2024)
- Increasing demands on the efficiency of the administration
- Changing social norms and values in society and the world of work (Tietmeyer & Seng 2024)
- Cultural barriers within established administrative structures (Rölle 2020)
- Limited financial resources (Weinzierl et al. 2024)
- Challenges in personnel recruitment and retention (BMI 2024)

Against this backdrop, the question of whether agile project management can contribute to the transformation and improved performance of public administration is becoming increasingly important. Various opportunities and starting points are discussed in the literature: for example, it is argued (Richenhagen 2022) that agile approaches could help to overcome existing barriers to innovation and secure the ability of public institutions to act in the face of dynamic framework conditions (Tietmeyer & Seng 2024).

Agile project management can also create a basis for structural changes and act as a supplement to traditional project management without completely replacing it (GPM 2025). Rather, it opens up alternative scope for action and can contribute to the establishment of a change-oriented organizational culture. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that administrations are certainly capable of agile forms of working, provided that there is a corresponding need (Richenhagen 2022: 4ff.). A gradual introduction of agile principles, for example in the form of pilot projects or hybrid project management approaches, therefore appears to be a realistic option.

In addition, agile methods can trigger new motivational impulses for employees and promote a willingness to change (Looks 2018). Agile approaches can also encourage greater citizen participation and strengthen trust in administrative action (Bartowitz 2018). In this context, management theories and models appear not only as theoretical concepts, but also as potentially practice-relevant management tools for the public sector (BMI 2024).

A courageous implementation of agile principles could even enable individual administrations to position themselves as pioneers of modern administrative management (GPM 2025). In view of the challenges outlined above, it seems imperative that public administrations position themselves to be viable for the future, willing to learn and open to innovation in order to maintain their performance even under changing conditions (BMI 2024).

DISCUSSION

The analysis in this article makes it clear that agile project management in the public sector can be a relevant and future-oriented management tool that is suitable for responding to the complex challenges of a changing environment. Especially in the context of public administration, which is traditionally characterized by stability-oriented, hierarchical and often cumbersome structures, the introduction of agile approaches represents a paradigm shift (Cohn 2024).

The theoretical discussion and the practical examples analyzed show that agile project management should not be seen as a panacea, but rather as a complementary approach to the existing administrative logic (Terzer 2024). The realization that agility does not require the complete replacement of traditional project management approaches, but rather represents their further development, is central to the discussion about transferability to the public sector. The specific framework conditions of public administration, such as legal requirements, low change dynamics, limited incentives for innovation and limited human and financial resources, make it difficult to directly implement agile methods as they are successfully applied in the private sector (PMCC 2025). At the same time, current social transformation processes (including digitalization, demographic change, sustainability) and crisis experiences such as the COVID-19 pandemic show that administrations are under increasing pressure to adapt their structures and processes. Agile project management can serve as a strategic tool here to enable flexible, iterative and citizen-centric solutions to problems.

However, the discussion also reveals significant areas of tension. On the one hand, agility requires a high degree of personal responsibility, iterative planning and decentralized decision-making, principles that are often viewed with scepticism in traditional administrative cultures. On the other hand, it offers the opportunity to motivate employees, create conditions that promote innovation and strengthen participatory structures. (Quixy 2024)

A central evaluation is that pilot projects and hybrid project forms offer suitable entry points for testing agile methods in a limited, controlled framework. Success factors for such an introduction are a supportive leadership culture, clear objectives, suitable training opportunities and an open error and feedback culture. This article also makes it clear that Scrum is particularly suitable for the administrative sector, as it offers a clearly structured framework with defined roles and processes. This can provide orientation and at the same time create security in the transformation process. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that other agile methods, such as Kanban or design thinking, can also potentially make valuable contributions and should be included as part of further research (HR Works 2025).

Last but not least, the discussion shows that the introduction of agile structures must not be limited to the organizational level alone, but that a cultural change is necessary. Administrative action must be increasingly geared towards flexibility, user orientation and responsiveness. This calls into question existing power relations, decision-making logics and control mechanisms and requires strategically accompanied change work. (Kommunalcampus 2024) Overall, an ambivalent picture emerges from the discussion: the potential of agile project management is clearly identifiable, but the requirements for successful implementation in public administration are complex. The need to develop existing administrative structures carefully but consistently remains one of the key challenges. Future research should therefore focus more on specific

implementation strategies, success factors and barriers, ideally including comparative empirical analyses at national and international level. (Bensberg et al. 2024)

CONCLUSIONS

Agile project management has become a central component of modern project control in the private sector, where it has become indispensable. In the public sector, too, it is becoming increasingly apparent that agile methods are perceived as a potentially profitable approach to overcoming current challenges. This is evidenced, among other things, by the existence of the Agile Administration Forum, whose aim is to integrate agile principles and working methods into municipal administrations in particular (Stucki-Sabeti et al. 2022).

It is crucial to understand agile project management not as a replacement but as a supplement to traditional project management. A radical paradigm shift is neither necessary nor expedient. Rather, a hybrid project management approach that combines traditional and agile elements appears to be a pragmatic way to utilize the advantages of both systems. However, this requires a fundamental openness to change, experimentation and innovation. Agility offers a broad spectrum of methodological and cultural impulses for this. Particularly with regard to digital transformation, there is a high degree of compatibility between agile management methods and digitalization processes (Weinzierl et al. 2024). The results of this work suggest that agile project management is able to make internal administrative processes more effective and promote a stronger customer and citizen focus.

The use of agile approaches also offers the opportunity to focus more strongly on the needs of employees and citizens. In the long term, this can help to increase public institutions' ability to act and willingness to adapt. The practical examples analyzed show that a gradual introduction of agile elements, through the agile design of individual projects, can already achieve initial positive effects.

The results of this article make it clear that the statement quoted in the introduction "We're doing things the way we've always done them, so why should we change anything?" (Acatech 2024) is no longer up to date. An administration that clings to traditional patterns fails to recognize the need for adaptation and innovation. In order to remain viable for the future, it is essential for public administrations to question established structures and try out new ways of thinking and working.

It should be noted that this article concentrates primarily on agile project management, with a particular focus on the Scrum method. Other agile methods such as Kanban, Design Thinking or Extreme Programming are not dealt with in depth. Similarly, the concept of hybrid project management, although potentially highly relevant, was only mentioned in passing. Further studies could start here and examine in more detail the extent to which different agile methods are used in different administrative contexts.

Furthermore, it would be useful to apply the knowledge gained from this work specifically to individual challenges facing public administration, for example in the area of digitalization or demographic change. A comparative analysis at an international level, for example between administrations in different cities, countries or regions, could provide additional insights and help to derive specific recommendations for action.

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