Does agile mean the end of the Project Manager?

By Ebba Sjöblom

As more and more organizations adopt agile principles, project managers might find themselves a bit lost. What is the role of the project manager in the context of self-organizing teams, scrum masters and product owners? Are the project manager's days numbered?

If your organization is embracing agile methodologies, you might already be familiar with agile principles such as planning in small iterative phases and embracing changes throughout the project management process. Agile is a change method for project management, or for transforming entire organizations.

Organizational change is not a walk in the park. Implementing new processes and roles often raise issues and uncertainties. Organizations can get help along the way using agile frameworks. There are a range of agile methods available to assist. But with the absence of the agile project manager in common agile approaches, as well as the introduction of new agile roles, there is growing confusion about what the normally crucial function of the project manager is in agile organizations.

This master thesis aims to shed some light on the need for and definition of the agile project manager role. The study found that the agile project manager plays an essential role for organizations during their agile transformation journey. Moreover, the agile project manager proves crucial for development efforts that utilize a hybrid approach, combining agile and traditional project management practices. While highly mature agile organizations with minimal reliance on traditional project management practices may not require an agile project manager, the role can still be valuable for large and complex development efforts that demand extensive cross-functional coordination.

For project managers employed at organizations transitioning to agile, it can be reassuring to discover that many of the key responsibilities and competencies of the project manager remain relevant in both traditional and agile settings. However, the study found areas of overlap in responsibilities with agile roles, such as planning and coordinating. Therefore, the agile project manager may find new and valuable collaboration opportunities with agile roles.

Just like traditional project managers, successful agile project managers demonstrate flexibility, strong communication and coordination skills. However, the study revealed that agile project managers can benefit from acquiring new skills such as agile framework competency and servant leadership skills. In summary, the project manager can still play a vital role in contributing to the success of many agile projects. The key difference is that an agile project manager serves and leads the teams, rather than solely managing the project.

This is a popularized summary of the master's degree thesis: *Exploring the Agile Project Manager* by Ebba Sjöblom (2023).