

Is agile better? New forms of work from the viewpoint of occupational psychology.

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What is the right 'dose' of agility?

Many traditional, hierarchically managed companies are increasingly asking themselves whether they are and can remain future-proof. Global market demands are increasing because products are being replaced more and more rapidly with new, improved ones and customers have higher requirements of service.





Is agility the solution? After all, it means that agile companies could react quickly and dynamically to such requirements. But is agility more than just a popular buzzword? Does the concept live up to our expectations?

Agility in organisations describes 'the ability of teams and organisations to act flexibly, adaptively and quickly in an uncertain, changing and dynamic environment' (see Hofert (2016). *Agil führen [Agile leadership]*, own translation)

From large corporations to small businesses – in recent years many teams or departments have set out on the path to greater agility. Or they have introduced agile organisational forms for the entire workforce.

Companies such as Google, Audi, Tesla, Deutsche Bahn and ING have restructured themselves accordingly – and they have done so successfully, as a report by Fraunhofer shows. As a result, they often also achieve a higher return thanks to the gain in agility. This is confirmed by the *Agile Performer Index* of the consulting firm [goetzpartners](#): Accordingly, the most agile companies in an industry are on average 2.7 times more successful than their peer group. The most agile industries are travel and transport and professional services. The energy sector brings up the rear, as does the financial services sector by a wide margin.

It's not possible to give a generic answer concerning the best way to introduce and use agile methods – companies and the requirements they have to respond to are too different.

Nevertheless, there are general recommendations for certain company sizes. For example, researcher Joachim Heidelbach and his colleagues from the Department of

Corporate Strategy and Development at the Fraunhofer Institute for Manufacturing Engineering and Automation (IPA) have developed clear [recommendations](#) for action for medium-sized companies.

In addition, it is generally true that companies do not have to immediately initiate the very big, comprehensive change process. Rather, individual methods also contribute to higher organisational efficiency – and also increase employee satisfaction because individuals are able to take on more personal responsibility. This can be achieved by selecting suitable methods that can gradually bring more agility into the company's daily routine. Would you like to learn more about a few selected agile methods?



More on this
in [article 2](#)

Agility can promote health and lead to employees finding their work more meaningful. The key to greater job satisfaction lies in giving teams more responsibility – for example, through self-direction of their workload. However, if this is not done, the new form of work can quickly become a burden. As occupational psychologists, we want to look at the issue of health.



More on this
in [article 3](#)

A new generation is entering the labour market – these individuals are very well educated, with high levels of digital competence. They know exactly what they can do and have very specific expectations about work-life balance. We asked Generation Z: What is the experience of younger people in particular when they join an agile organisation at the beginning of their professional life?



More on this
in [article 4](#)

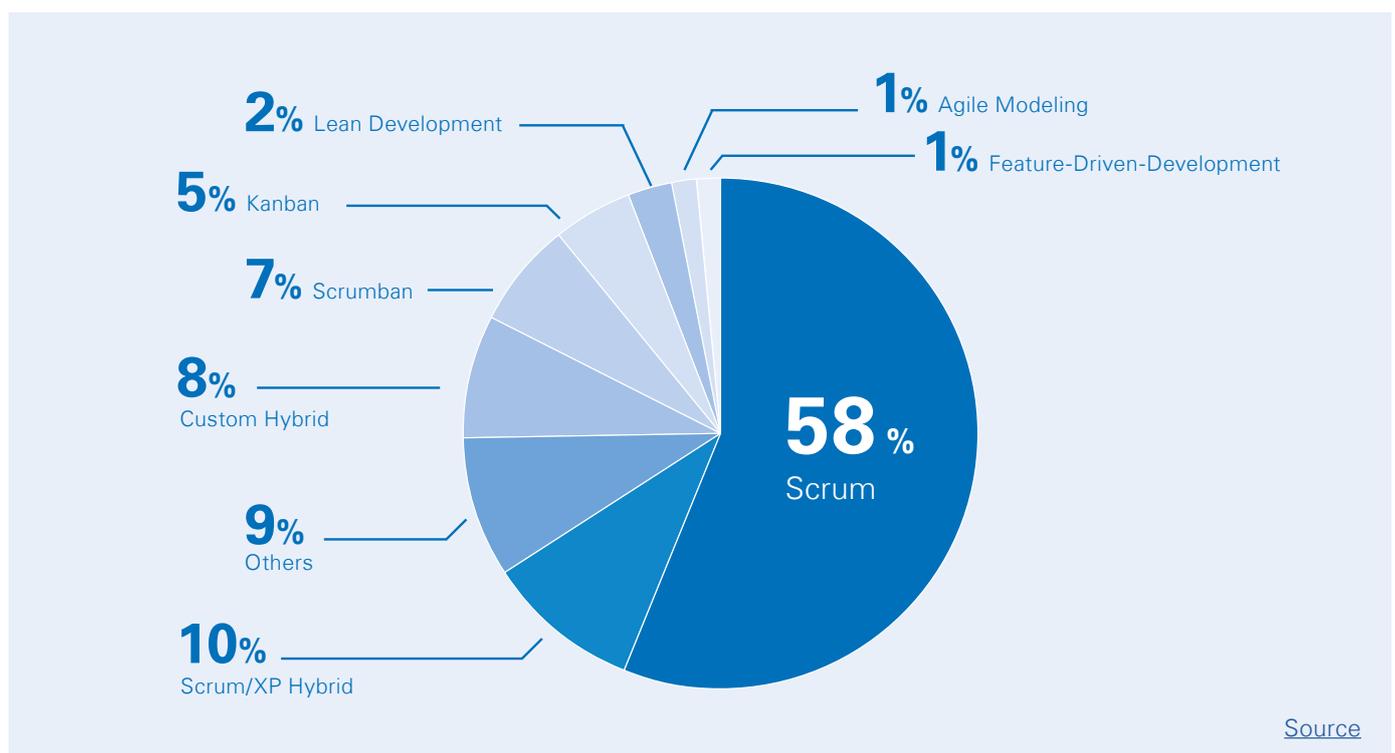


Agile Techniques.

There are many different agile methods and techniques. You may have heard of *Scrum*, *Kanban* or *Lean* or you may have even worked with them? *Scrum* is by far the most frequently used agile method, as you can see in the following chart.

Each agile method in turn consists of different agile techniques. These can be introduced and tested at team level

– without the need to change the entire organisation at the same time. For interested companies or teams that want to take the first step towards agile forms of work, we present two techniques. Both are elements from the *Scrum* methodology; they are easy to establish and promote cooperation and ownership at team level.





#DAILY STAND-UP MEETINGS

A *Daily Stand-up Meeting* (*daily* for short) is a technique from the *Scrum* process. However, unrelated to this, it is also an opportunity for team discussion and joint, goal-oriented cooperation. As the name suggests, it is a daily meeting of the team members. In order not to prolong the meeting unnecessarily, it is held standing up. The [Scrum Guide](#) recommends strictly limiting the *Daily* to 15 minutes. However, it is important to focus on the needs of the company and the individual team members and to make an appropriate decision that works for them.

In the *Daily*, each team member answers the following questions, but they can be adapted and exchanged:

- 1) What did I do yesterday?
- 2) What will I do today?
- 3) What obstacles do I envisage?

In corporate practice, it has proven helpful for managers to participate only in exceptional cases and after prior announcement in order to enable team members to have an open exchange amongst themselves. In addition, it is useful for the structure and efficiency of the meeting to appoint a moderator. The moderator can either always be one specific person or may change on a rotating basis.

A regularly held *daily* promotes the exchange of knowledge and experience within the team, increases the team's self-organisation, potential problems are recognised more quickly and team cohesion and trust of each other are strengthened. Dailies are particularly suitable for teams that do not meet in person on a daily basis, i.e. for spread-out teams or for teams in which work is (partly) done in a home office or on the road. The more similar the task area, the more the individual team members benefit from the knowledge transfer.



#RETROSPECTIVES

The *retrospective* (*retro* for short) is also a meeting that originates from the *Scrum* process. It is a joint review of a firmly defined work or project period in which processes, cooperation, challenges and experiences are reflected. Based on the findings, measures for the next period are derived and defined.

The following four questions, known as 'the 4Ls', are suitable as a starting point:

- **Liked:** What went well?
- **Learned:** What have we learned?
- **Loathed:** What did we not like?
- **Longed for:** What would we have wished for?

The 4Ls is only one possible method that can be used for a *retro*. [The Retromat](#), for example, offers a wide range of other possibilities.

Usually, managers do not participate in a *retro* in order to promote open exchange within the team. Nevertheless, it can be useful to involve the manager in the decision-making process.

A *retro* can be understood as a team development measure, as the team members learn how to express constructive feedback and appreciation among themselves, which strengthens team cohesion. In addition, *retros* increase the scope for action, autonomy and self-efficacy, as the team members themselves make a joint decision on how they want to handle tasks and deal with challenges. In addition to the health-promoting aspects, a regular *retro*, in which projects and processes are also reviewed, contributes to the continuous improvement process.

Agile work from the view-point of health protection.

The introduction of agile working is leading to fundamental changes to how work is designed. We spoke with Florian Jumah-Eckert from Dedalus about the effects of agile working on personnel selection and development, discussed the new understanding of leadership and took a closer look at the new challenges of agile working in relation to psychological stress in the workplace.

Mr Jumah-Eckert, what does agility look like in the Dedalus Healthcare Group and how is it implemented?

We don't work according to the textbook rules of *Scrum*, rather we apply agility in an agile way. This means that we adapt the agile way of working to the requirements of the team in each scenario. I always say „we work *Scrumish*“ because we use elements from *Scrum* but have adapted them for us. We cannot work in an agile manner across the board, as our products are subject to legal requirements. Our scope is therefore more restricted. However, we can be flexible in how we distribute time and tasks. Agility is also experienced in different ways within our teams. In some teams, everyone can carry out all the tasks – that would be classically agile. In other teams, we have experts with individual knowledge. Tasks cannot be distributed arbitrarily.

How does the way you work affect your personnel selection and development?

It is very important for us to share knowledge. Expert knowledge should always be divided between at least two people. Experts with individual knowledge are encouraged to pass on their knowledge to other employees. In addition, there are regular internal training sessions for employees who share their experiences from projects. When selecting personnel, we make sure that they have previous technical knowledge. But this does not necessarily have to be sector-specific. It is much more important to us that the people fit into the team and have good social skills. Motivation for the activity and teamwork is just as important as having fun with innovations and the associated challenges.

OUR INTERLOCUTOR



Florian Jumah-Eckert
R&D Site Manager Trier
Dedalus Healthcare Group

There is a formula behind performance. $\text{Performance} = \text{Ability} \times \text{Will}$.

This formula fits us very well. For us, will is much more important than ability. If someone has the motivation and the willingness to learn, the ability comes automatically. Of course, new colleagues are always supported individually and at all times by our teams and individual colleagues.

In connection with agility, there is often talk of a new understanding of leadership. How is leadership practised in your company?

Our team leaders are called *Agile Line Managers (ALM)*. As disciplinary supervisors, they are responsible for target setting, personnel planning, distribution of tasks and team coordination. They are therefore also there to ensure that the team can work well without disruptions. It is also their responsibility to recognise and encourage the intrinsic motivation and personal initiative of team members. It is particularly important to show our employees our appreciation of their continuous commitment and work. Individuals who feel appropriately valued have a much greater ability to develop and to make full use of their strengths. Transparency and openness in communication are basic prerequisites

for this type of staff management, as is trust in the abilities of the staff. We can only establish this culture if we all live by it and our employees are equally open and transparent towards us.

What scope for action and decision-making do the individual employees have at your company?

The aim is to enable employees to contribute according to their individual strengths. We therefore also want employees to take personal responsibility and to speak up if they have suggestions for improvement, for example. Not only the employee alone, but the whole team experiences self-efficacy thanks to the extensive scope for action.

SELF-EFFICACY

“Refers to one’s beliefs about one’s ability to perform certain actions necessary to achieve a specific goal.” (Stroebe, Jonas, Hewstone, 2002, p. 584, own-translated)

What opportunities for mental health do you see in agility?

Agile working increases personal responsibility and thus gives almost every type of person the opportunity to flourish. Moreover, despite its size, our company feels like a family *start-up* to the employees. The core teams are very manageable for the individuals and most of the work is carried out in this core team. It is very important to us that the developers really feel at home with us and in their team and that they enjoy being part of it. Of course, this also has a positive effect on motivation and staff loyalty.

And what risks for mental health do you see?

The challenge is to ensure that the delegated responsibility also matches the employees’ decision-making skills. In

FIELDS OF ACTION FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DESIGN OF AREAS IN WHICH AGILE WORKING PRESENTS POTENTIAL TO IMPROVE HEALTH:

1. Participation and qualification of employees
2. Rethinking leadership (renegotiating tasks and skills)
3. Empowerment of the teams (degrees of freedom and agency)
4. Collective rules and guidelines (company agreements, workplace health management)

Müller & Wille, 2019 in “Gute agile Arbeit” in Jahrbuch: Gute Arbeit 2019. Bund Verlag, Frankfurt/M.

addition, there may be an increased need for discussion when decisions are made, as everyone has the chance to say something about it. Of course, that costs more time. It is then necessary to find a good middle ground and sometimes it may also be necessary to take a decision ‘from above’. Furthermore, experience has taught us that although design freedom is important in agility, it is important to clearly define roles. Otherwise, role conflicts can arise and lead to psychological stress. Apart from that, I don’t really see any risks. I am absolutely convinced of the agile way of working.

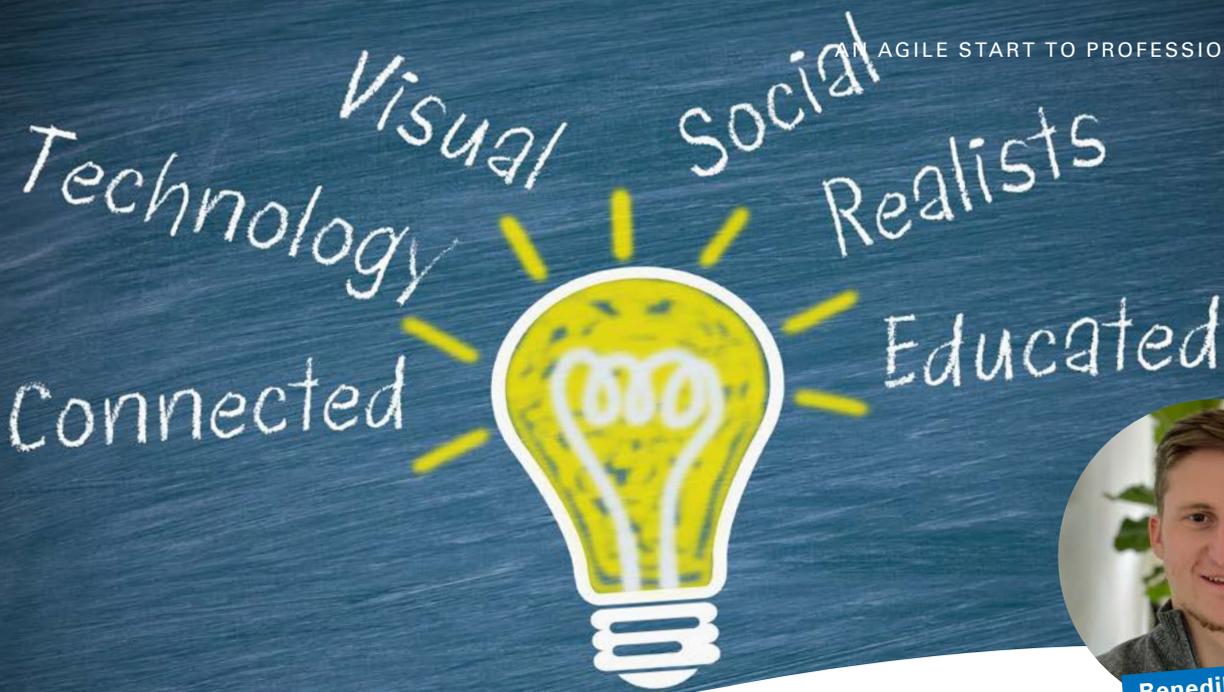
This enthusiasm was clear to see in you throughout the entire interview. Thank you very much for your openness and for the interview!

Specialist Information #4 will be published in December

DEAR READER:

From an occupational psychology perspective, the changed way that work is designed results in new resources that keep people healthy and motivated. However, new ways of incorrectly loading individuals can also occur, which then become relevant to health protection. Find out how mental health can be taken into account within the company in the 4th edition of our Specialist Information publication, which will revolve around the new ISO 45003 on managing mental health in the workplace.





Benedikt Weber

Software developer, focus on
web development, SprintEins GmbH

An agile start to professional life.

How do young people look at the world of work when they start their professional life in an agile way?

We had the opportunity to talk to Benedikt Weber, born in 1997, who joined SprintEins, a software development company, as a web developer immediately after completing his degree. Benedikt already studied agility as part of his degree. *Scrum* was on the curriculum and practical projects were used to explore how tasks are estimated in *story points* and organised in *sprints*. We report on Benedikt's view of his first experiences in the world of work.

#AGILE COMPANY

At SprintEins, the whole company structure has been geared towards working in an agile way. The company has defined and lives by clear agile core values and practices such as reflection as an important tool. Basic training on agile methods is mandatory for every new employee. While agile working is practised in the software development department, this is not possible across the board in the supporting functions such as HR – however, the agile mindset prevails amongst all employees. No department relies on service by the book. Instead, a new decision is regularly made as to whether processes and tasks are appropriate. If this is not the case, they are adapted to the current requirements.

#AGILE IN THE TEAM

Benedikt's team composition changes depending on the project. The individual teams are organised based on *Scrum*. *Sprint planning* takes place every 2 weeks on Mondays, in which the complete *sprint* (period of 2 weeks) is planned. Every day there is also a *daily* from the frontend developers. They go through the *board* with the tasks (cf. *Kanban board*): What problems do I have? Where am I failing to make progress? Where can I help or where can others help me? At the end of the *sprint*, the team members discuss the current status of the project in the *sprint review* and derive topics for the next *sprint*.

#AGILE MINDSET

When choosing his employer, it was important to Benedikt to be able to take personal responsibility for his work on projects and to be able to learn a lot from various perspectives. It is important for all employees to share knowledge: for example, there are regular 15-minute presentations that anyone can give and many people report on their own *best practices*. Benedikt's impression is that the mixture of ages also brings added value for everyone.

Benedikt also attaches importance to the fact that he can contribute with his suggestions even as a new employee

and does not have to stick rigidly to guidelines. So they sometimes skip a *daily* if it doesn't suit them. Care is always taken to ensure that the method fits the team and that it is fit for purpose.

#METHODS

In Benedikt's view, openness as a basic attitude is the most important prerequisite for being able to act flexibly. For him, the *daily* is one of the most important methods to ensure that everyone is always 'on track' and that developing problems are not noticed too late. Coming together also prevented individuals from running off in the wrong direction during the pandemic period and then wasting a lot of time and energy until the mistake was noticed.

#LEADERSHIP THROUGH TRUST

Leadership at SprintEins is divided between many people – the *CSLs*, the *PSLs* and the *DLs*.

The *Customer Success Leads* are not classic team leads. Their focus is only on the success of the clients and the project. *People Success Leads* are initially assigned to each new employee, but can then be chosen by the employee. They take care of personal well-being and individual development. The *Domain Leads* impart skills in their field of expertise and promote knowledge transfer.

Benedikt appreciates this kind of leadership very much. He is not at all comfortable with leadership that involves monitoring and constant control. Each employee has a lot of say and decision-making power, but must also contribute and act with personal responsibility.

#SO AGILE REALLY IS BETTER?

Benedikt cannot find anything to criticise about agile working in general. It is important that decisions are made collaboratively: Does it make sense to change the procedure here or not? Anyone who is not yet familiar with agility should try it out on a small scale and then decide whether this way of working is effective or makes sense for him or her and for the task at hand.

#AGILE ≠ AGILE

In the meantime, there are barely any software companies who do not advertise agility on their own homepage. However, every company understands it differently, so it is worth asking carefully: How do you work in a team? What does your calendar look like? What methods do you use? How is leadership lived by at your company?

[We would like to thank Benedikt for the insight into the reality of his working life.](#)



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