



# Agile in Government Volume 2

An analysis of how to achieve tangible, sustained growth in a rapidly changing environment using Agile methodologies

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## Introduction

In Volume 1 of McBride's coverage of Agile fundamentals and its applicability to the Public Sector, several methodologies under the umbrella of "Agile" were introduced. These methodologies included Scrum, Kanban, and company-specific variations. This second volume will explore how Agile has been used successfully, share an outline for how to implement agile effectively, and speak to some of the benefits of trying this new approach. In furtherance of those aims, two common methods of how Agile can be adopted in the public sector will be showcased: specifically, process reforms/redesign and the more traditional information technology example. Agile is not without its critiques, which will also be addressed and measured against its return on organizational investment.

## Benefits of Agile

Agile allows teams, programs, or companies to go to market faster with their products and/or services. This speed gives them a distinct advantage, as they're able to receive end user feedback more quickly than competitors and adjust to the demands of their customers or stakeholders. There are also significant cost savings to be had in knowing when a product or service will not be received favorably by markets allowing for an opportunity to pivot to avoid sunk costs.

One way Agile allows for such speed is by breaking up large deliverables into smaller, more manageable pieces. The process is then further refined by limiting how many of these smaller tasks can be worked on at once and for how long, depending on the Agile methodology being employed. By having teams focus on just one or a few smaller tasks at a time, rather than trying to engage a whole program, those teams can continually deliver progress for program stakeholders to review and measure. Ultimately, the return on investment as compared to more traditional program management methods is the greatest benefit a company can expect.

## Implementation Strategy

An Agile transformation in the public sector, however ambitious, can only be successful if led by the right champion. This requires someone who is not attached to a singular idea, but rather focused on the desired outcome. Those who have spent time within the Agile community know the former is all too common, unfortunately, and frequently elicits sub-optimal results.

McBride Consulting's philosophy is unambiguously results-driven, rather than process-driven. Whether it be a pure Scrum model, Agile layered onto an existing PMO, or the incorporation of

Agile slowly into a waterfall department, the overarching purpose is to increase efficiency, speed, and quality. McBride can work with your department to curate the core principles that have made Agile attractive to the business realities of your organization.

Interested and wondering where to start? At the highest level, the McBride approach would: identify a project, plan for success, and measure your outcomes.



Figure 1: Implementation Strategy

## Identify

The first step towards a successful Agile project is to identify a project, initiative, or effort that is not meeting its efficiency aims. Ideal implementation environments could be found in a smaller project, as it offers a fruitful test-case with a well-defined scope and limited variability. This will help in creating a strong foundation for your project.

Once the project is identified, a proper analysis of the current state should be performed, supplemented by an Agile assessment to evaluate the appropriate methodologies to use. The current state analysis should identify the current inputs, processes, actions, steps, interactions, and outputs used on the project. This will then inform the Agile assessment to determine the best Agile system to implement for each of the project’s specific datapoints.

There are many different Agile methodological choices, including Scrum, Kanban, or perhaps a tailored solution drawing on several Agile concepts with existing organizational practices. McBride Consulting works to customize the most efficient solution to the organization in question, not to blindly implement Agile to all situations or projects.

## Plan

Once a current state analysis and Agile assessment are completed, a review of the program’s backlog will be initiated to kick off the planning phase. As part of this process, a visual

representation will be created of the key items that the project wishes to accomplish and the obstacles that may inhibit progress.

Any plan must also consider the composition of a project team. In many Agile aspects, a discreet but empowered team is developed after being carefully selected and equipped with the requisite training to make an effective implementation. At the executive level, it is crucial for the project stakeholders to be involved early in the decision-making process to garner collective buy-in to the new methodology. Consistent with Agile principles, a continuous feedback loop should exist between teams and stakeholders so any comments and updates can be incorporated into the plan in real-time.

## Measure

With the team now committed to delivering work in shorter, reliable intervals, many data points can be identified and measured over the course of the program. This will provide critical analytics to determine the success of the project itself and engender more expansive buy-in throughout the organization. Mass adoption will also help to continue driving increased efficiency and implementation on a larger scale.

Adopting an Agile methodology, however, does not only mean releasing work products more often, but also leveraging metrics to measure productivity regularly. What previously took months to release and then measure is now scaled down to short intervals that allow the teams to pivot and change course rapidly. The ability to rapidly change course based on data and metrics will lead to countless savings over the lifecycle of a project.

The data reported out should be utilized by the project champion to share success with senior leadership and external stakeholders. Again, this affords the feedback loop and data sharing to expand the broader buy-in of the organization.

## After the first project: Building Momentum

With the success of the first Agile project, the next challenge is slowly building on the prior efforts while accounting for broader hesitations. To do so, McBride believes in a training and education program which helps the public organization broaden Agile awareness, disseminate best practices, and share examples of success with internal stakeholders. This allows the organization to pursue wide-scale adoption and develop a culture of change and adaptation. As we alluded to in Volume 1, driving nimbleness is often challenging for organizations and McBride Consulting is confident Agile can be a steppingstone to greater public services and support. Ultimately, the success of the first project will be the best-selling point for further adoption across the enterprise.

## Critiques of Agile

While the benefits of Agile outweigh perceived shortcomings, to provide a comprehensive analysis a review of Agile's critiques are warranted. One of the key drawbacks is the iterative and

incremental nature of progress within the confines of Agile. This complicates defining or measuring success via standard metrics.

Additionally, as with any major change or new technique, change management and training are required. To achieve widespread adoption, the long-term change management and training costs must not exceed the gross savings gained from adopting this new method. To spur additional interest and momentum, a clear financial expediency must be demonstrated.

## Precedent of Success

### McBride Covid-19 Program

Though perceived shortcomings are important to recognize, precedent speaks to the benefits of adopting Agile methodologies. On a recent project that entailed distributing Covid-19 funding to affected populations, a need arose to quickly update processes to achieve three goals: align processes with new federal treasury requirements, increase efficiency to drive disbursements, and make business processes parallel the software functionalities.

To achieve this goal, McBride and its partners employed several Agile concepts. Starting with the program's inception and establishment of the PMO, leadership made a conscious decision to incorporate cross-functional teams throughout each program's structure. By creating a mandate for cross-functional teams, the program prevented siloed knowledge, ensured each team had sufficient personnel to succeed and limited the resource-intensive training that would have otherwise been necessary. Also, a choice was made to keep the hierarchy as lean and flat as possible (within the constraints of a government contract) allowing for nimbleness as program conditions changed.

Agile concepts were not limited to leadership decisions but also employed at the team level. One involved breaking down work - be it complex programs or single workstream projects - into manageable pieces where the level of effort for completion went from months to weeks or even days. This ultimately enabled a single individual to manage a case without being reliant on other team members. In keeping with the principles of Kanban, that case would then be tracked along its journey from reception, processing, status assignment and, finally, to payment.

The brand of Agile employed on this program, if compared to a software development startup, may be lacking in responsiveness. However, having layered Agile concepts on top of existing work models amplified efficiencies, enabled teams to pivot with ever-changing realities and ensured compliance with governmental regulatory and contractual requirements.

### United Kingdom Local Government Initiative

As Volume 1 detailed, Agile is an umbrella term that captures many different concepts. One of these concepts is MoSCoW, which is a four-step approach to balancing project requirements in a manner that maximizes return on investment, focusing on the following components: 'Must have', 'Should have', 'Could have' and 'Will not have' (alternatively, 'Want to have'). Further, this

approach within an agile framework would be applied not only to the overall project, but also to project increments and in the planning of specific timeboxes.

Joining McBride Consulting's advocacy for Agile in the public sector is the United Kingdom's Local Government Association's (UK-LGA's) application of MoSCoW. Drawing upon best practices and Agile-specific investments in training and personnel, the UK-LGA adapted its digital government initiatives to deliver projects where the cost and time variables were fixed from the outset, enabling more flexibility and prioritization in addressing project requirements as they arose.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, the UK initiative was credited with the successful rollout of digital payments with approximately £70,000 in initial savings. With other similar projects in the queue, Newcastle's adoption of Agile also had non-financial benefits – it bolstered engagement and interdependence across multiple sectors, while empowering staff to realize that they could influence project outcomes.

## Conclusion

With strong leaders and champions, Agile amplifies efficiencies, drives cultural change, and broadens the capacity of the public sector to serve their citizens. The few critiques of Agile, that its progress is incremental, metrics can be hard to establish, and that there's a slow uptake to the cultural shift, do not deter from the return-on-investment organizations stand to gain if these concepts are introduced in a responsible fashion. The drumbeat of the public sector before the advent of the pandemic was 'do more with less.' Agile is a concept that helps achieve this important goal.

To some, the declaration of 'increase efficiencies' can be too utopic or banal. That suspicion lends itself to seeing the same old bureaucracies and stalled processes that have become endemic to the public sector. Instead, equipped with Agile concepts, the public sector can set a significant example by reducing their operating costs, coordinating teams thoughtfully and being ready to adapt to a new era.

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<sup>1</sup> [Newcastle City Council Agile project management](#), UK Local Government Associate, Jan 2017 (accessed Mar 2022)



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