# Why businesses warm to 'Agile' working (and all those Post-it notes on whiteboards)[1]



The modern corporate world is currently divided by two opposing philosophies of project management. On one side stands the traditional Waterfall model; on the other, the increasingly dominant Agile framework, specifically its most popular iteration: Scrum.

**The Origins of the "Tall Stack of Futility"**

For decades, the Waterfall process was the "safe bet" for any engineering project. It is a linear, sequential method where you cannot move to the next phase—be it design, implementation, or testing—until the previous one is officially "signed off."

However, critics like Jeff Sutherland, one of the co-creators of Scrum, argue that this leads to a "tall stack of futility." In his view, Waterfall is inherently wasteful because it assumes that humans can perfectly predict the future. By the time a project is delivered months or years later, the market has often shifted, or the initial requirements have become obsolete. Sutherland famously claims that this rigid bureaucracy "kills the soul" of talented workers.

**Where does "Scrum" come from?**

The term "Scrum" was not originally from the tech world; it was borrowed from the sport of Rugby. In a rugby scrum, the team acts as a single unit, pushing together to move the ball forward. This metaphor was chosen to emphasize collaboration and collective responsibility over individual hierarchy.

In 2001, Sutherland along with 16 other software visionaries met in Utah to draft the Agile Manifesto. They wanted to move away from heavy documentation and move toward "individuals and interactions over processes and tools."

**The Mechanics of Agility**

To achieve this, Agile breaks the project into small, manageable chunks known as Sprints. A Sprint is a time-boxed period, typically lasting two weeks, at the end of which the team must deliver a functional piece of the product.

The heartbeat of this process is the Daily Stand-up Meeting. These are short, 15-minute sessions where team members answer three questions:

1. What did I do yesterday?
2. What will I do today?
3. Are there any impediments (bottlenecks) in my way?

By standing up, the team ensures the meeting stays brief and focused. It is not a status report for a boss, but a synchronization for the team.

**Collaboration over Competition**

At its core, Agile is about transparency and continuous feedback. Instead of working in silos, developers, designers, and the Product Owner collaborate constantly. The Backlog—a living list of every feature the product needs—is constantly reprioritized based on stakeholder feedback.

While more traditional companies like ING or John Deere were initially skeptical, the data is hard to ignore: Agile projects have a significantly higher success rate than Waterfall ones. In a fast-paced "Fintech" economy, being nimble is no longer an advantage—it is a requirement for survival.

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[1] Based on Lisa Pollack's article *"How project management turned into a Scrum"* published on Financial Times https://www.ft.com/content/144bda3a-39ac-11e5-bbd1-b37bc06f590c?syn-25a6b1a6=1

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## Exercise 1

**Match each term with the correct definition**:

***Sprint – Backlog - Impediment - Stakeholder – Milestone***

| **Terms** | **Definitions** |
|---|---|
| | **a)** A prioritized list of tasks, features, or requirements that need to be addressed in a project. |
| | **b)** Anything that prevents a team member from performing work as efficiently as possible. |
| | **c)** A specific point in a project timeline used to measure progress toward a final goal. |
| | **d)** A fixed period of time (usually 2-4 weeks) during which specific work must be completed. |
| | **e)** Any person or organization that has an interest in or is affected by the project |

## Exercise 2

**Choose the correct answer**:

1. What is Jeff Sutherland's main criticism of the Waterfall model?

   a) It requires too many highly skilled engineers.
   b) It assumes that project requirements can be perfectly predicted at the start.
   c) It is a very cheap but slow way to build software.

2. The term "Scrum" was inspired by rugby to highlight:

   a) The importance of physical activity in the office.
   b) The need for a team to work together as a single, coordinated unit.
   c) The competitive nature of software developers.

3. What happened in Utah in 2001?

   a) A group of experts wrote the Agile Manifesto to change how software is made.
   b) The Waterfall model was officially banned by the tech industry.
   c) Jeff Sutherland invented the first rugby-based computer game.

4. Why do team members "stand up" during their daily meetings?

   a) Because there are usually no chairs in modern tech offices.
   b) To ensure the meeting remains quick, efficient, and focused.
   c) To show respect to the Product Owner and the Scrum Master.

5. According to the text, what is the "Backlog"?

   a) A report of all the mistakes made during the previous year.
   b) A living list of every feature or task the product needs.
   c) A physical wall where Post-it notes are thrown away.

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## Exercise 3

Fill in the blanks with the following words: ottleneck - synchronize - sequential - obsolete - iteration.

1. A slow server response can create a _____, stopping the rest of the team from finishing their tasks.
2. In the tech industry, a project requirement can become_____ if the market changes before the final release.
3. The Daily Stand-up is not a report for the boss, but a way for the team members to _____their work.
4. Scrum is considered the most popular _____of the Agile framework in the modern corporate world.
5. The Waterfall model is a _____method where you cannot move to the next phase until the previous one is finished.

## Exercise 4

Decide if the following statements are True (T) or False (F)

1. Waterfall projects start a new phase only after the previous one is finished.
2. Sprints usually last six months to ensure everything is perfect.
3. The Agile Manifesto prefers processes and tools over individuals and interactions.
4. In a "Daily Stand-up", team members identify bottlenecks or obstacles.
5. Agile projects have a statistically higher success rate than Waterfall ones.

## Exercise 5 – Discussion Topics

- Jeff Sutherland claims Waterfall "kills the soul" of workers. Do you agree that rigid and highly documented processes make people less motivated? Why?
- Agile projects have a 39% success rate vs. 11% for Waterfall. If Agile is statistically better, why do many large companies still resist changing their way of working?
- The "Daily Stand-up" requires total transparency with the team. Do you think this visibility helps productivity, or does it create too much pressure and micromanagement?

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