Innovation Or Control?
IT Development Using Agile Techniques

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Problem of practice

A *large proportion of Information Technology (IT) projects worldwide use agile techniques to improve speed and delivery quality, yet they often fail. Among the principal reasons is the prevalence of inflexible management styles, which clashes with the flexibility required by agile-oriented IT development.*

Project managers often default to traditional control structures, which leads to misalignments between teams and strategic goals. Agile frameworks for developing information systems encourage innovation and quick responsiveness but can be prone to inefficiencies, if based on the wrong managerial control. If managers promote excessive autonomy within their teams, it could breed goal divergence, while exerting too much control suppresses imagination and team participation. So, how to strike a balance between control and autonomy? Recent research by Peter Virag, Edward Bernroider and Ulrich Remus suggests the answer lies in dynamically choosing between four management styles: Landscaper, Buddy, Detective and Commander.[1] *We illustrate how project managers can switch between control and autonomy based on context and specific project needs, thus improving IT project outcomes such as time, budget and quality. Such evidence is especially of value to IT leaders, CIOs and project managers, leading transformational & intense industries, wherein both execution excellence and innovation remain critical*[2]

[1] The article 'Agile Project Management Styles and Control Ambidexterity in Agile Information Systems Development Projects: An Exploratory Case Study' by Peter Virag, Edward Bernroider and Ulrich Remus, featured in Volume 25, Issue 5 of *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* talks about achieving control ambidexterity in agile ISD projects and identifies four agile project management styles

Agile rising

A staggering 35% of IT projects worldwide claim to use agile techniques.[3] Agile frameworks for IT project management break projects into smaller, iterative phases (called cycles or sprints) to prioritize collaboration, flexibility and rapid delivery.[4] A hallmark of agile techniques is the emphasis on continuous feedback, adapting to changing requirements and empowering the team. Prominent agile frameworks include Scrum (fixed-length sprints and defined roles), Kanban (visualizes workflow and limits tasks in

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progress), Extreme Programming (blends engineering practices like pair programming) and Feature-Driven Development (organizes work around building key features).[5] However, only 31% of such agile-enabled projects are regarded as successful.[6] With the rapid digital transformation and dispersed teams, as well as evolving stakeholder demands, rigid, one-size-fits-all management approaches are no longer sufficient.

Management styles as choices

Landscaper style for innovative projects: This style allows teams to be innovative with no constraints. Here, the manager behaves like an enabler in ensuring all the facilitators are available and all blockages are mitigated. Independence fosters creativity and a sense of ownership in projects that involve exploration or experimentation, ensuring that ideas yield the best results. An example of such a Landscaper style is Google's '20% time' policy, which allowed employees to spend 20% of their working time on independent projects unrelated to their core work. Innovations like Gmail and Google Maps came about from this policy. Google fosters a trust-based approach where employees are given the freedom to find solutions that are not directly supervised, but are aligned with organizational objectives.[7] Another example is Spotify, the music streaming platform, which applied landscaper style to develop revolutionary recommending algorithms, such as building a culture that is not only collaborative but also autonomous.[8]

Spotify's success demonstrates that this freedom can enable teams to drive leading innovation that aligns more closely with strategic goals, ultimately helping to achieve better results.

Buddy style fits cross-functional teams: This approach encourages collaboration and shared responsibility between the manager and team members, as the manager is perceived and behaves like a team member. This approach, therefore, works well with cross-functional teams needing alignment and trust. This approach further encourages the acquisition of co-working efficiencies and energizes the entire team, leading to increased commitment. Ultimately, such an approach empowers faster accomplishment of project goals in an environment of continuous improvement.

Take the example of ING, a global financial services firm. Apart from being one of the world's leading international banks with a program for agile transformation, it was organising employees into cross-functional squads and tribes, thus encouraging peer-based collaboration to improve cohesiveness and accountability.[9] Here, agile coaches became facilitators rather than supervisors.
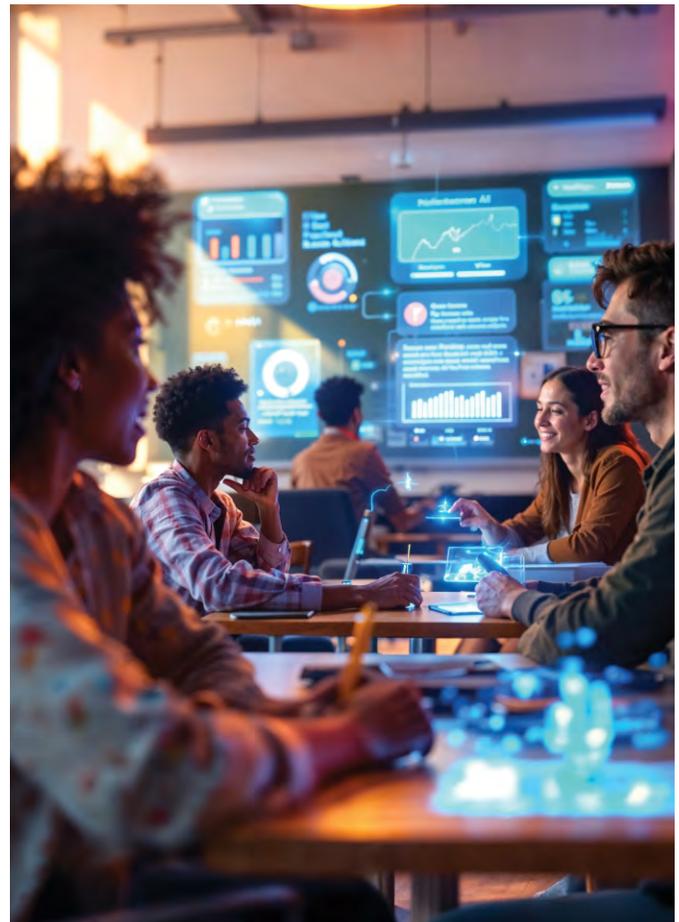
Management styles for IT project
- Landscaper style for innovative projects
- Buddy style fits cross-functional teams
- Detective style balances by monitoring
- Commander style for control

Detective style balances by monitoring: The Detective style balances innovation with accountability by monitoring. Managers monitor progress by metrics and give teams room for innovation. It enables initiatives to be delivered on time, without creating a barrier to innovation. An active feedback loop ensures continuous alignment with customer needs and operational goals.

Amazon, a global e-commerce and cloud service provider, exemplifies a Detective style. While software development teams are given the freedom to innovate, IT projects are closely monitored at each stage using data-driven tools and digital dashboards. Metrics include project delivery efficiency scores and customer satisfaction scores.[10] To ensure continued innovation, operational excellence and productivity, Amazon has struck the right balance of controls and autonomy using data accountability.

Commander style for control: Commander style is a controlling and hierarchical approach to decision-making, typically found in high-stakes or regulatory projects that require prioritizing accuracy. While this style suits urgent, short-term deliverables, it hinders innovation and is likely to fail in contexts that require breakthrough innovation.

Contexts where precision, compliance and risk take precedence over the need for experimentation and exploration are better suited for Commander style. Examples include IT projects focused on incremental innovation in aerospace, defense, pharmaceuticals, healthcare and regulated financial services. In such industries, companies require adherence to safety and legal protocols, as well as zero-error delivery. Here, the Commander style provides reliability and accountability that other styles may compromise on. Although innovation may be slower, Commander style becomes indispensable when lives, assets and regulations are at stake.

A cautionary tale of a mismatch between objectives and Commander style is the case of Nokia, a former global powerhouse in smartphone design and manufacture. Nokia's early product launches – when the need for innovation was incremental – leveraged the Commander style to good effect, resulting in a rapid

increase in topline and bottom-line growth.[11] Nokia's stringent project management practices ensured tight control and the timely launch of its flagship mobile devices during its heyday. With the advent of radical innovation in smartphones such as the iPhone and Android, Nokia's over-reliance on such strict controls backfired. A lack of radical innovation downgraded Nokia's relative position in the smartphone market, eventually leading to an exit.[12]

Style flexibility

While the above styles might seem to be one-company, one-style, we recommend adapting and selecting from the four styles based on the needs of a particular project (*see Figure 1*). Imagine a scenario where a manager in an early-stage software startup plans to use a Landscaper style for a development team to get the creative juices flowing but deploys with a Detective style for quality alignment. Such a choice must fit with the industry context: for IT development in a heavy industry context, a Commander-oriented style would be appropriate for the conceptual and discovery phases. The above scenario illustrates the importance of having a process to align context with IT development style. A lack of such alignment can cause teams to drift away from organizational goals, duplicate efforts, slow scaling and create 'bridges to nowhere' – innovations that add little to no business value.

Figure 1: Agile projects: Balancing autonomy and control

		COMMANDER	DETECTIVE
Management control of IT projects	**High**	Nokia	Amazon
	Low	ING	Google Maps Spotify
		BUDDY	LANDSCAPER
		Low	**High**

Autonomy given to IT teams

Source: Developed by authors based on Peter Virag, Edward Bernroider, and Ulrich Remus. "Agile Project Management Styles and Control Ambidexterity in Agile Information Systems Development Projects: An Exploratory Case Study." Journal of the Association for Information Systems 25, no. 5 (2024): 1274–302. https://doi.org/10.17705/1jais.00880.

Organizations with tight hierarchies, such as legacy manufacturing firms or government agencies, are more justified in avoiding changes required to adopt Agile techniques.[13] Routine or compliance projects tend to be more rules-based, require little or no innovation and are more aligned with a Commander-type project management approach.

However, even firms operating in legacy markets should be vigilant about the pace of digitization. While traditional banks resisted adopting agile techniques in conventional, backend systems, this resistance became an inhibitor to innovative ideas, while startups in the competitive fintech market flourished.[14]

Investment considerations

Dynamic management styles require both monetary and intangible investments. Organizations in the Asian/ Indian markets can anticipate spending USD4,500-18,000 a year on capacity-building programs, such as leadership development, agile coaching, and formal workshops. They would need to spend around USD500 as training fees per person for courses like ICP Agile Certified Professional in Agile Coaching (USD280-335) and PRINCE2 Agile Practitioner (USD395-560), which would lead to a substantial increase in cost when implemented across teams.

In addition to individual training, organisations may have to upgrade collaboration platforms, re-architect workflows and redesign performance systems to support agile values. These facilitate teams in efficiently adopting, switching and mixing styles, such as Commander, Buddy, Detective and Landscaper, depending on the project situation. Also significant are the non-monetary expenses. These include resistance to change, short-term productivity loss and decision-making uncertainty, as old-fashioned hierarchies are

adjusted. These soft impediments tend to prevent adoption more than monetary problems.

To overcome this, a phased implementation is suggested, beginning with pilot teams to learn, show success and build internal champions. Leadership, sponsorship, clear communication and effective feedback loops are essential for instilling the framework into the organisation's DNA.

The investment is not just in training, but in cultural agility and building adaptive teams that can handle high-velocity project complexity. If done correctly, this puts companies in a position to realize the full potential of agile delivery.

Gaining success

Innovation and control are the two significant elements that successful agile information systems development projects need. IT program managers need to be able to select from each of the four management styles based on the context and project needs.

These insights transform individual projects into an organizational strategy. Organizations that can adapt their management styles will ensure effective use of agile techniques and gain competitive advantage.

Glossary

- Control ambidexterity: Managers' ability to adaptively balance control and autonomy to accommodate different project circumstances.

- Cross-functional teams: Teams of people from diverse departments or functions working together for a common project objective.

- Digital transformation: Strategic embedding of digital technologies into every aspect of an organization, redefining how operations are conducted and creating value.

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