AGILITY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION – IS AGILITY A POSSIBILITY AND WHERE ARE ITS LIMITS?

Nadine Anders[1] and Birgit Schenk[2]

Abstract

Digitalization offers a variety of advantages: speed, efficiency and agility [1]. Its goal is to speed up workflow processes, to give the employees more time to focus on important work and to provide them with the opportunity to be agile in order to meet new expectations, new requirements and new trends. Besides speed and efficiency, agility is one of the most important goals because it is an answer to the requirements of a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment – the so called VUCA world. [2] In the private sector the concept of agility has already proved to be an answer to rapid change and volatility but is it also a concept for Public Administration with its own special requirements of stability and continuity as well? This paper tries to answer this question and to work out the limits of the new concept considering agile methods and agile organizational elements.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Issue

Since public administration has to face Digital Transformation [3] and innovation, they also gradually start to adopt the agile approach to help their organizations harness the opportunities offered by Digital Transformation as well as innovation to provide the public services of the future which meet changed customers' expectations [4].

Agility, as a business concept, originates from a manufacturing context and the need to be more flexible. This need also arose in the organizational context and therefore the concept of agility was transferred to the organizational context. [5] The two main points about being agile are emphasized as (a) an organization operating in a changing competitive environment and (b) the organization can take effective action to benefit itself and its customers and exhibit responsiveness in a turbulent environment. [6] A general definition offered by Horsapple and Li: "*Agility is the result of integration alertness to changes (recognizing, opportunities/challenges) – both internal and environmental – with a capability to use resources in responding (proactive/reactive) to such changes, all in a timely, flexible, affordable, relevant manner."[7]* Since we live in a VUCA world, our government and public administration also needs to react faster, more efficiently and more

[1] HVF Ludwigsburg, University of Applied Sciences, Reuteallee 36, 71634 Ludwigsburg
[2] HVF Ludwigsburg, University of Applied Sciences, Reuteallee 36, 71634 Ludwigsburg, birgit.schenk@hs-ludwigsburg.de

effectively to meet the requirements of all stakeholders, all threats and any rapid alteration with its challenges. This leads to the question of the characteristics of public administration.

Our public administration stands for stability, security and the control of public interests. [8] Quite the opposite of agility. These core principles of stability etc. arisen from the need to provide solutions which guarantee the principles of equal treatment (non-discrimination) and legal certainty. Valid laws and provisions, regulations and guidelines as well as the resulting tasks are deduced from these principles and result in a special organizational structure with fixed organizational processes. They are tailored to cope with daily work but not to meet the requirements of a VUCA world.[9] These principles also demand working methods which allow people to cope with stable and inflexible structures, routine and regularity, as well as employees who are willing to work in an environment with comparatively little change in their day-to-day working life and are therefore comfortable with regulations, avoidance of any uncertainty, high power distance etc.

Considering agility and the core principles of public administration the question arises, whether agility as an organizational concept is suitable and could be implemented in public administration.

1.2. The Study

To remedy this fundamental question we needed (a) a catalogue of characteristics of agile organizational elements and agile working methods as well as (b) people who try to work agile in public administration and are therefore are able to assess the suitability of the agile concept for public administration.

To create a frame-work we first of all identified the dimensions of agile organization elements and agile methods, then we looked for criteria which describe these dimensions and indicators which allow us to measure them. The whole frame-work is based on literature. The cornerstones of agile organizations are described by Häusling [10] in the areas of agile organizational elements and agile methods. The dimensions *organizational structures, business processes* and *strategy* describe the organizational elements. The dimensions *management culture, human resource management,* and *organizational culture* describe the usage of methods. Each of the six dimensions consists of core elements and its indicators for measurement. Table 2 gives an example of the dimension *processes* with its elements.

Dimension *Processes* literature based	
Agile Project Management	Complex and dynamic project management
	Focus on performance / outcome
	Change is regarded as a chance for improvement
	Alertness - continuous response to trends and alterations
	Fixed budgets and time-span
	Focus on customers and customer feedback
	Visualization of the project steps e.g. backlog, scrum board etc.
	Quick decision making / short decision-making channels
	Project team is authorized to make decisions
	Self-management of the team / working in cross-functional teams
	Working in sprints with defined partial results
	Working in continuous improvement loops

Table 1. Results of the literature study concerning the dimension „processes" and its describing elements.

Afterwards we designed a semi-structured interview guide.

Six experts were identified for the interviews who are also a part of experiments on working agile in public administration. One expert is part of a so called "Forum for Agility". He is experienced in different agile ways. He actively practices agility in his day to day work and he tries to transfer the new findings into public administration in general. Two experts work in the public administrations of cities and three experts work in the public administration of districts. Two of the six experts are located in a separate staff unit, one expert works in a so called "innovation laboratory" and one other works in the department of Agility. Only one expert works in a "normal" department (see table 1).

Interview	Organization	Field of Duty
1 Expert	County / Baden-Württemberg, population > 250.000	Division Digitalization
1 Expert	County / Bavaria, population < 100.000	Division County-Development
3 Expert	City / Baden-Württemberg, population > 100.000	Division Digitalization / Agility
1 Expert	Forum Agility	Agility in Public Administration

Table 2. Interview partners

The results of the literary review and the interview results were compared and analyzed to see if they are reciprocally related to be able to answer the question raised in this paper.

Additionally all experts were asked about the limits of agility in public administration. The answers were analyzed and compiled to get an overview.

2. Agility in Public Administration – findings based on dimensions and elements of agility

To find out if agility could be implemented in public administration, we analyzed the answers of the interviews. First of all the experts emphasized as elements of an agile organization, agile project management, agile attitudes and agile values. They named agile values such as customer orientation, quick decision making and short decision-making channels as well as changes in decision making procedures (so that the team could decide), adaption of their reporting system, working in self-management, working in inter-divisional and cross-functional teams, networking as well as working in sprints and continuous improvement loops. Table 3 gives an overview of the findings considering the dimension *Processes* as an example of all the other dimensions.

Dimension *Processes* interview based	
Agile Project Management	Customer orientation Visualization of the project steps e.g. backlog, scrum board etc. Changes in decision-making procedures and short decision-making channels Adaption of the project reporting Project team is authorized to make decisions Self-management of the team / working in cross-functional teams Inter-divisional networking cooperation Working in sprints with partially defined results Working in continuous improvement loops

**Table 3. Results of the interviews concerning the dimension „processes"
and its describing elements (shorten version, for the complete table see [11]**

Another core element seems to be the working attitude in support units and departments of public administration. One expert said that it is only possible there to work agile if the functional

departments such as finances, human resources, ICT-departments etc. promote a culture of service. He subsumed this under the element *inter-divisional networking cooperation.*

None of the experts mentioned *focus on performance / outcome, change regarded as a chance for improvement, alertness – a continuous response to trends and alterations, fixed budgets and time-span.*

Similar to the results in respect of *Agile Project Management* are the results of the other elements. The reorganization of business processes and organizational structure were seen as major topics as well as a space specially designed for agile teams and New Work.

All of the experts favor an open and target-oriented organizational structure and ask for clarification of the responsibilities of the departments and its members as well as the constructive handling of business interfaces which offers a higher potential for improvement. Information channels should be defined to guarantee transparent processes with its own working atmosphere. If information is available where it is needed (anytime and anywhere), employees act proactively, react faster, more flexibly and more efficiently.

Four of the five experts said that they implemented parallel structures to the bureaucratic-hierarchical structure (see figure 1). Their project teams work in a network inter-divisional structure. This new parallel structure is supported by a different interior and working space design e.g. two of the five experts had implemented creative rooms to support agile work.
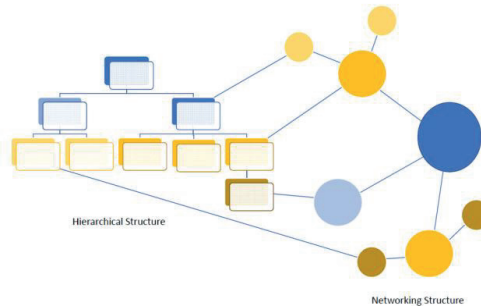
Figure 1. Parallel working structure

All of the experts emphasized that customer-orientation is one of the major aspects. They all want to add value on the service for the customer. Even if in public administration customers are more diversified than in the private sector, they point out that it is essential to integrate them in service-design processes. One expert said that customers are always part of the solution, not part of the problem. [12] Inviting customers to give feedback was not mentioned by any of the experts during the interviews. Working in projects with customers is common practice in the "innovation laboratory".

Agile work was defined by using agile methods. These are used in the areas of business management as well as human resource management and they should be used to encourage an agile organizational culture. None of the experts mentioned management as one of the core elements of agility. That is amazing because it is well known that this is a major factor to implement agility. Kotter & Rathgeber state that public administration is "managed well BUT bureaucratic and unable to proactively act / react quickly" [13]. This statement proves that public administration has not yet

found a balanced way to manage and lead to a guaranteed agility. Even if it is said that management and leadership is very important, there is little to nothing done to change the culture of leadership or even to improve or to support managers in public management. It is still hierarchical. [14] One of the experts pointed out that this is a problem in public management. [15]

Employee participation together with the transfer of responsibility to the employees receives special mention by the experts. They think it is one of the most essential elements. All of the experts noted that they focus on both aspects and implement them. Two experts already involve their teams in the process of setting goals as well as encouraging their teams to take on the responsibility for their steps and the accountability for their actions.

All of the experts stated that responsibility and accountability arises out of self-management and autonomous work. They try to create an atmosphere of empowerment, participation and autonomy within their teams. This working style also motivates their people, encourages new ways of thinking and working as well as achieving improved working results. [16] One expert mentioned that they decided to implement agile methods in the whole organization due to these positive effects.
One of the experts pointed out that employee participation is one of the key factors for organizational change. Therefore, they encourage participation in their "innovation laboratory" in order to encourage change.

Asked about the elements of *management and leadership* all experts referred to further education programs and information events. Other tools to support management and leadership (e.g. alternative career prospects) are not supported in their organizations.

Learning on a trial and error basis is looked at critically because of the legal framework and the promise to guarantee legal conformity. So this is an aspect which is not easy to implement even in agile work spaces. Four of the experts mentioned that they implemented learning on a trial and error basis by introducing sprints which offer the possibility for detecting failure quickly and changing action accordingly. In this way a culture of constructive criticism could be achieved.

Considering the catalogue of characteristics of agile organizational elements and agile working methods as well as the results of the analysis of the interviews of the experts – who are already working agile in public administration - the question whether agility could be a concept for public administration with its special requirements of stability and continuity can be answered with a positive yes. The question about the limits of agility in public administration is still unanswered.

3. Limits of Agility in Public Administration

The second part of the interview showed an additional perspective of agility in public administration and was subsumed in an answer from one of the experts: "The limits of agility are set by those who set the framework for our work, allocate resources, and who show their willingness to accept agility within the organization."[3] [17] Aspects of this framework are explained in the following lines.

Agility and Federalism: The federal structure of the public administration in Germany includes the following levels: towns and cities, counties, states and the government. The particular importance of

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[3] Original in German: „Die Grenzen sind letztlich dort, wo diejenigen, die uns die Rahmenbedingungen, die Ressourcen zur Verfügung stellen, bereit sind, agil mit zu gehen oder nicht mit zu gehen."

public administration results from its monopoly and its legally regulated mandatory tasks and its voluntary services. All of these tasks can be structured into routine work, semi-structured and unstructured work as well as in sovereign, political and voluntary tasks.

Asked about the possibility of implementing agility, all of the experts explained that agility is a possibility at all levels of the federal structure if the principle of appropriateness is respected.

Legal and political requirements: The core principles of equal treatment (non-discrimination) and legal certainty have to be guaranteed throughout all decisions and actions within public administration but there are several opportunities to achieve more flexibility – and therefore more agility – without any violation of any applicable law. [18] Hill argues that the scope for action and decision-making activities – the so called *discretion power* – should be used positively. This opinion is supported by all of the experts. Two experts pointed out that they see difficulties arising with procurement law because there is little discretion left.

Allocation of resources: Resource allocation is the biggest limitation of the implementation of agility in the opinion of all respondents. Especially if it comes to salary levels regarding qualified specialists and skilled workers, as well as budgetary inflexibility and position- as well as personal planning. They say that the normal position plans are not compatible with agility. Two experts pointed out that the transformation process needs more staff at the beginning, more training of the staff appointed and also the expertise of external personnel. All of these aspects raise the cost and the budgets need to be increased. The managers in charge need to be aware of this otherwise agility can't be implemented properly.

Willingness to change and preparedness to change: All of the experts agree on the fact that if there is no willingness to implement agility by those responsible members in top management or by politicians, it is not possible to implement agility in an organization as well as across all federal levels. They are responsible for resource allocation and set the rules, they motivate and de-motivate staff. Additionally the elected representatives e.g. the city council, need to support the changes.
Besides these limits concerning willingness and preparedness, implementation depends on the ability of each individual. Not every person is able to work agile and not every person is able to change his/her habits after a long working life.

4. Summary

Considering today's trends and major changes such as the Digital Transformation or the requirements of a VUCA world, we asked whether agility is a suitable concept for Public Administration with its special requirements of stability and continuity.

To answer this question we developed a framework of dimensions and elements which describe agility based on literature, to be able to interview experts in public administration to a greater extend and to assess their answers. Since the study is based on a sample of six interviews it can be seen as a first step towards testing the methodology and the results can be interpreted as an indicator. General conclusions on the applicability and limitations of agility in public administration need to be verified by further research.

Nevertheless, the results indicate that agility is compatible with the requirements of public administration. All of the experts pointed out that service-oriented tasks demand agility because agility increases speed, efficiency, customer-orientation and continuous improvement. These

characteristics of agility also serve project management and the fulfillment of semi-structured, as well as unstructured, tasks. On the other hand they concluded that the implementation of agility depends on (1) the willingness of the responsible members in top management and of the politicians, (2) the particular areas of responsibility and tasks, and (3) the business processes and structures as well as (4) the individual ability. These are obviously the barriers which have to be overcome for the implementation of agility.

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