

# **Trend, Fad, or Revolution – The Evolution of Management Concepts Using Agile Management as an Example**

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## **Abstract**

Management concepts often oscillate between transient fads and enduring practices. Predicting their evolution remains a key challenge in management research. This paper applies Management Fashion Theory to analyze the lifecycle of 'Agile Management,' a concept that originated in software development and has since permeated diverse organizational functions. Drawing on historical data, a literature review, and Google Trends analysis, this study identifies Agile Management's alignment with the characteristics of management fads: a catchy label, promises of performance improvements, interpretative flexibility, universality, and dissemination via rhetorical patterns. The analysis shows that Agile Management has risen rapidly to prominence, with evidence of its widespread adoption and institutionalization in education and practice. However, its trajectory mirrors the typical lifecycle of management fads, peaking in popularity before signs of decline emerge. Despite this, some indications point toward its potential to transition into a sustained management practice rather than fading completely. The results highlight the dual nature of Agile Management as both a compelling response to organizational challenges in a digital era and a concept vulnerable to overhyped expectations. The paper concludes by discussing the broader implications of management fads for organizations, emphasizing the need for critical evaluation to distinguish enduring value from transient appeal.

## **Keywords**

Management Fashion Theory, Management Fad, Agile Management

## **1. Introduction**

New management concepts are regularly introduced. Some make their way into textbooks, spread through companies over decades, and become management classics. Others, however, experience a brief hype and are soon forgotten. The concept of "Agile Management" claims to help companies "develop the ability to adapt to change in order to succeed in a turbulent environment" (Agile Alliance, 2023). With this, the concept might have found the answer to the core question of all organizations: how to succeed with which type of organization. The idea of "Agile Management" became popular in the early 2000s, initially as a more narrowly defined method or tool in software development. Since then, the concept of Agile Management has evolved into a universal framework that impacts all areas of management. Today, we have Agile Marketing, Agile Human Resource Management, and Agile Leadership. More than that, we now live in an "agile world" or the "agile era" (Madsen, 2020). The interpretation of the concept ranges from open calendars or team meetings to claims of a fundamentally new principle of leadership and organization. In between, concepts like Agility, Scrum, Design Thinking, and Lean Management can be found. As broad as the understanding of agility is, the evaluations of the concept are equally diverse. Between enthusiastic reviews (Denning, 2018) and the prospect of a revolution (Kahan, 2018), there are also skeptical views urging caution in evaluating the management concept (Cram & Newell, 2016) or even predicting its end (Cagle, 2019).

While only time will tell if Agile Management will become a lasting concept, this paper aims to take a meta-perspective. Using the Management Fashion Theory, it seeks to answer how the concept of Agile Management emerged, which actors are involved, and where Agile Management might currently be placed in the lifecycle of

management concepts. In the following, the conceptual idea of organizational agility will first be presented, followed by a discussion of the main points of the Management Fashion Theory. This will help to determine whether Agile Management is merely another management fad with foreseeable obsolescence or if it has the potential to permanently change the way work is organized.

## **2. A Brief History of Organizational Agility**

The exact origins of the idea of Agile Management are difficult to pinpoint (Whiteley & Pollack, 2019). However, the starting point for the rapid spread of the concept can be traced back to 2001. At that time, influential software developers published the so-called "Agile Manifesto" (Beck, et al., 2001), which contributed significantly to the popularization of Agile Management.

The manifesto outlined twelve core principles of agility in software development, such as customer satisfaction being the highest priority, regular progress reviews, simplicity over complexity, and prioritizing face-to-face communication.

What began as a niche concept within the software development community quickly became part of mainstream management education. The acronym VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) was often used to describe the state of the world, justifying the need for agile management as a response to these challenges. When the digital transformation was proclaimed in the 2010s, the concept of agility seemed even more suited to the evolving challenges faced by businesses. It thus resonated perfectly with the "spirit of the times" (Madsen, 2020).

## **3. Agile Management as a Management Fad?**

The theory of management fads provides explanations for why some management concepts spread rapidly, why they become so popular, and what their typical life cycle looks like before they are replaced by other fads (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999).

Abrahamson (1996) defines management fads as "relatively transitory collective beliefs, disseminated by management fashion setters, that a management technique leads to rational management progress." The following sections will introduce the function of management fads (3.1), their characteristics (3.2), and the key actors who operate in the "arena of management fads" (Kieser, 1997) (3.3).

### **3.1 Functions of Management Fads**

Fads provide users with guidance on what is considered good/right or bad/wrong. Fads are influential forces that shape the decisions of their users. They not only affect our choices when selecting outfits and accessories, influence materials, space layout, and color schemes in architecture, but also offer managers insights into which methods and tools to use when addressing organizational challenges. In the organizational context, fads manifest in specific management concepts. Referring to a management fad simplifies the selection of goals or practices that managers face when shaping leadership, planning, or control issues within organizations (Abrahamson, 1991; Kieser, 1996).

### **3.2 Characteristics of Management Fads**

Management fads can be characterized by certain key features. These include the need for (1) a catchy and recognizable label, (2) promises of performance improvement, (3) interpretative flexibility, (4) universal applicability, (5) dissemination through specific rhetorical patterns, and (6) a distinct life cycle.

#### **Label**

To attract attention, management concepts are typically branded with a catchy phrase (e.g., Balanced Scorecard or Total Quality Management). The concept of "Agile Management" fulfills this requirement, being concise, memorable, and recognizable. Moreover, it almost functions like a magic word that can be applied in various contexts. Publications, websites, and industry reports show that the label "Agility" is versatile enough to be combined with other

terms. For example, we see pairings such as Agile Leadership, Agile Mindset, Agility Coaches, Agile Organization, or Agile Master.

#### Promise of Performance

A key feature of management fads is that their advocates raise high expectations and promise performance improvements (Benders & Van Veen, 2001). Potential users are unlikely to adopt a new concept if they cannot recognize the future benefits of its application.

Agility, too, is accompanied by promises of success. Increased customer and employee satisfaction, organizational flexibility, improved product and service marketing, and an innovative and productive work culture are described as outcomes of an agile organization (Brockmann, Nagel, Kahl, & Biermann, 2019). Conversely, the risk of not adopting agile methods is emphasized—companies that fail to do so may fall behind, become unattractive, and lose their competitiveness.

#### Interpretative Flexibility

A distinctive characteristic of management fads is their high degree of interpretative flexibility. The deliberately vague and open formulation of management concepts allows both providers and users to interpret these concepts according to their specific organizational needs and adapt them to their unique circumstances (Clark, 2004; Benders & Van Veen, 2001).

The term "Agility" is open and requires explanation. This interpretative flexibility allows agile practices to be tailored to the specific organizational context and goals or to be combined with other existing management concepts. Agile Management has thus evolved into a meta-concept, capable of being infused with various newly understood work models. Under the umbrella of agility, almost anything that can make work more efficient, faster, adaptable, or innovative can be understood.

#### Universality

Another characteristic of popular management fads, closely linked to interpretative flexibility, is that they are generally formulated in a universal manner. This allows them to be applied across organizations on a broad scale (e.g., Agile Management) as well as functionally (e.g., Agile HR, Agile Procurement, Agile Logistics, Agile Production). This universality expands the potential user base (Strang & Meyer, 1993; Fincham & Evans, 1999).

Agile methods are presented as a generic solution that can be applied at various levels of an organization and across different industries and company sizes. Therefore, scientists, politicians, and practitioners alike can rally behind its objectives.

#### Rhetorical Patterns

Kieser (1996) identifies management fads by their rhetorical patterns. A key factor is emphasized, its implementation framed as inevitable, and aligned with the values and beliefs of the target audience. The concept suggests a radical break from past practices, while avoiding blame or accusations, and provides universally applicable recommendations through a refined mixture of simplicity and ambiguity (Nicolai & Simon, 2001).

The concept of agility fulfills these rhetorical patterns. From the outset, "Agility" makes it clear that it breaks away from old structures, signaling a paradigm shift from a non-agile, sluggish organization to an agile, dynamic enterprise. Descriptions of agile methods typically avoid assigning blame. The previous approach was valid and necessary, but a new era now requires different solutions. The sometimes subtle, yet implicit message urges: those who do not adapt to the new circumstances risk falling behind.

#### Life Cycle

Management fads follow a characteristic life cycle, defined by successive phases. At the beginning of the cycle, interest is still low, but as the concept spreads, attention increases, reaching a peak and staying there briefly. However, once the first negative feedback surfaces and disillusionment sets in due to inflated expectations, interest declines but remains at a slightly higher level than at the start (Clark, 2004; Gill & Whittle, 1993). Although this general dynamic of the popularity curve has often been empirically confirmed, it remains debatable whether this ideal pattern is inevitable for a management fad, or whether fads can follow different trajectories.

To analyze interest in agility, the tool "Google Trends" can be used (Silva, Hassani, Madsen, & Gee, 2019). Google Trends tracks the search frequency of specific terms over time, starting from 2004.

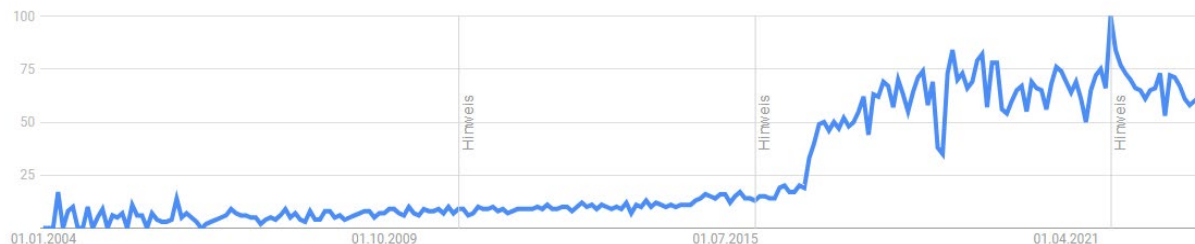


Figure 1. Google queries over time for terms related to Agile management

Figure 1 shows that interest in the concept of agility within the management context steadily increased from 2006 to 2015 at a relatively low level. After this calm period, interest surged, peaking in February 2022. Since then, interest has remained high but has gradually decreased.

Whether this indicates the typical life cycle of a management fad remains to be seen. The coming years will reveal whether interest continues to plateau at a high level or if it declines further, with the concept potentially being replaced by newer, more fashionable management tools.

### 3.3 Fashion Setters and Fashion User in the Arena

With the rise of management fads, a pull effect is created, drawing in both providers and users. Kieser (1996) describes this situation as an arena where actors interact cooperatively until companies award contracts, as they all share a common interest in establishing and maintaining the (new) management fad. In this context, the management fad unfolds either in a "market" (Abrahamson, 1996) or in an "arena" (Kieser, 1997), where participants act as either Fashion Setters (providers) or Fashion Users (customers).

#### Fashion Setters

The dissemination of management concepts is driven by Fashion Setters, which include consulting firms, so-called management gurus, conference organizers, publishers, and academia. They all share the common goal of enhancing their profit, reputation, or influence by spreading and perpetuating these concepts (Kieser, 1997). Below are some examples of Fashion Setters in the context of Agile Management.

Consulting firms play a key role as providers. Large, globally operating consulting firms regularly publish blog posts and articles on the topic (in external or their own journals) and offer consulting services for agile organizations (Madsen, 2020).

They all highlight the apparent urgency for change and, in the next step, offer their services to help with implementation. They benefit from mutual, cooperative publicity until contracts are awarded. At that point, they become competitors.

The origins of management fads are often associated with a management guru, to whom representatives from academia or practice attach themselves, with the guru being seen as *primus inter pares*. However, the Agile Management concept lacks such personalization. Although certain figures are closely associated with the concept (Denning, 2015), the concept does not revolve around a single central figure.

The popularization of management fads occurs at conferences, seminars, and workshops, where providers meet users. Entire databases can be found that list only conferences dedicated to agility (dasscrumteam.com, 2023). Events such

as the "Agile Leadership Conference" or "Agile Coaching" feature keynote speakers (often management gurus) who provide insights into the field. Thus, conference, seminar, and workshop organizers, along with the speakers, benefit from the demand for information on new management concepts.

Other Fashion Setters include media outlets, book publishers, and journal publishers. They capitalize on the uncertainty surrounding new concepts like Agile Management and direct readers towards them, who need to educate themselves about these novel, unfamiliar management methods.

Many new management concepts (such as New Work or Agile Management) do not originate from universities. Nonetheless, universities contribute to the dissemination and legitimation of these concepts by incorporating them into curricula, offering seminars on agility topics, or developing case studies on agility. This gives Agile Management a certain academic refinement that is reflected back into practice.

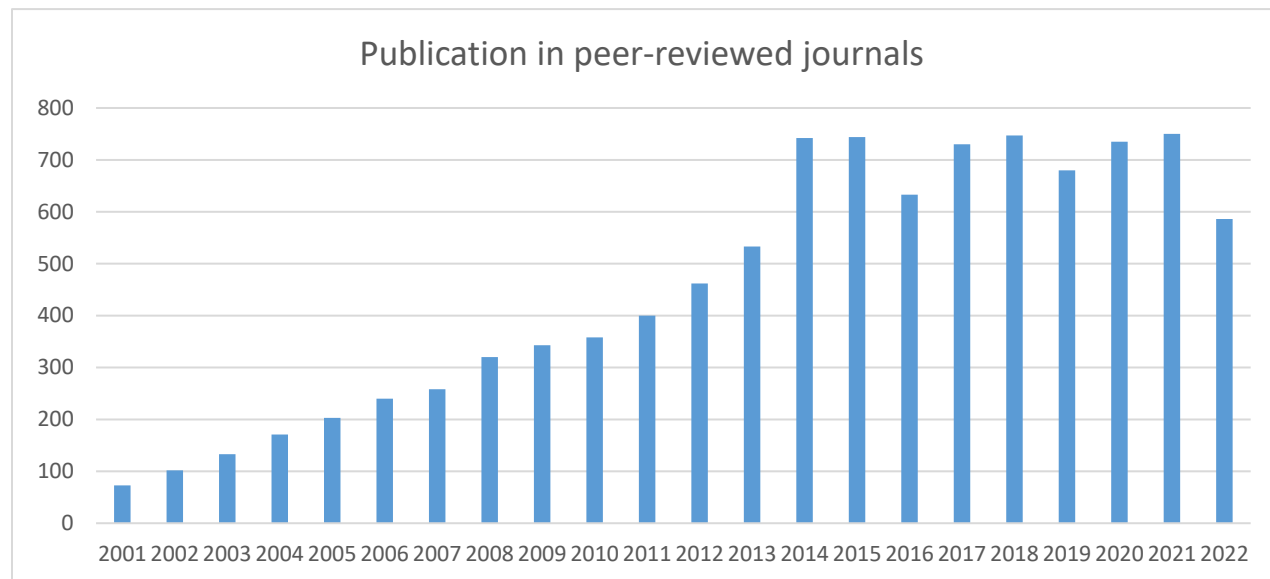


Figure 2. Publication in peer-reviewed journals over the time

Figure 2 shows the number of peer-reviewed journal articles on Agile Management (from the ebsco database). It illustrates how academia, initially slowly, then more eagerly, adopts the academic foundation of the Agile Management concept within the arena.

#### Fashion Users

Fads are demanded by executives, companies, and organizations. In this sense, management is both the object and the subject of management fads. It is the object because it is the target of efforts by Fashion Setters (consulting firms, conference organizers, publishers, etc.), and it is the subject because it has its own interest in spreading new management fads.

Abrahamson (1996) explains executives' desire for new management concepts by the internal or external pressures they face, such as from shareholders, to lead their organizations to higher levels of performance. Agile Management promises to fill this gap (see Rhetorical Patterns). Thus, adopting this management fad seems rational.

The ideal image of executives is that they drive innovation, use new and improved leadership techniques, and create value for employees and the organization. When new management concepts promise to help meet these high expectations, they are often readily embraced.

Agile Management presents itself as a solution during a transition from an Old Economy to a Digital Economy, as it offers answers to questions faced by all organizations. With the ongoing efforts toward digital transformation and the

simultaneous changes in the workplace due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the understanding of work, technology, and strategy is shifting. Here, leaders can fulfill their need for security and demonstrate an awareness of societal, technological, and work-related challenges.

## **4. Trend, Fad or Revolution?**

### **4.1 Summary**

The analysis of key characteristics shows that the concept of Agile Management exhibits several traits of popular management ideas, giving it significant fad potential. However, to make a final assessment of whether this concept is merely a fad or a game-changer, more time is needed. The popularity curve seems to follow an ideal pattern at this point in time. Whether it will eventually decline or continue to rise in the coming years remains uncertain.

If the expected benefits of Agile Management fail to materialize over time, users may become disillusioned, and interest could wane. On the other hand, the phenomenon of "sustained management fads" (Perkmann & Spicer, 2008) is now being discussed. If agility succeeds in institutionalizing itself (e.g., through educational programs, conferences, specialized consulting firms, or certification), a management concept that initially appeared to be a fad could contribute to lasting development and transformation in the business world.

### **4.2 Outlook: Should Management Fads be embraced?**

When considering whether a management concept is merely a fad or a long-term, success-driven development, the question arises: is the emergence of management fads a good or bad thing? Kieser (1997) offers an attempt to answer this.

Management fads can be distinguished by effective rhetoric versus mere rhetoric. If leaders manage to actively and consciously use management fads to boost motivation and energy, a fad can become an effective leadership tool.

At the same time, the potential benefit of a management fad also defines its limitation. Most people will eventually recognize the rhetorical strategy by the time the next fad arrives, leading, at best, to the feeling that "old wine is being sold in new bottles," or, at worst, to a cynical attitude toward all new developments in organizations.

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## **Biography**

**Christopher Paul** is a Professor of Business Administration specializing in Human Resource Management at the Baden-Wuerttemberg Cooperative State University (DHBW) Mannheim. He holds a Doctorate in Business Administration from the University of Mannheim and has extensive experience in both academic and professional settings. Prior to his academic appointment, he worked as an HR Manager Europe for an international publicly listed engineering company, where he gained in-depth expertise in strategic personnel management, cross-border HR operations, and organizational development.