

Critical Success Factors and Challenges in Applying Agile Project Management: A Systematic Literature Review

R. Hendy Setiawan¹, Eko Sakapurnama²

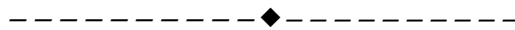
^{1,2}University of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia

Email: hendy.swn@gmail.com

Abstract

Agile project management has gained wide adoption for managing complex, dynamic projects, yet its success depends on various enabling factors. Despite its popularity, organizations frequently encounter challenges in implementing Agile practices successfully. This study systematically reviews existing literature to identify and synthesize the critical success factors (CSFs) that facilitate Agile project effectiveness, while simultaneously examining the prevalent obstacles organizations face during Agile adoption. Results indicate that Agile project success is largely facilitated by executive support, effective teamwork, active customer involvement, clear communication, and disciplined Agile execution. Conversely, significant barriers identified include organizational resistance, inadequate training, limited understanding of Agile principles, and coordination complexities in scaled or hybrid implementations. Successful Agile adoption necessitates balancing these enabling factors while proactively addressing prevalent challenges through robust leadership, comprehensive training, and tailored implementation strategies. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts, detailed failure analyses, and implications of emerging technologies on Agile effectiveness.

Keywords: *Agile Project Management, Critical Success Factors, Agile Adoption Challenges, Systematic Literature Review.*



A. INTRODUCTION

Globalization and technological advancements have created an increasingly competitive and challenging business environment. Terms such as disruption and VUCA have been used to describe a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business landscape. This situation has been further exacerbated by various global crises, including climate change, pandemics, and economic instability. Consequently, the term BANI has gained recognition and popularity as it is considered more relevant in depicting the increasingly chaotic state of the world. BANI is an acronym for Brittle, Anxiety, Non-Linear, and Incomprehensible. The BANI framework is regarded as a more effective approach to navigating an unpredictable and a chaotic world (Cascio, 2022).

In the BANI era, companies are compelled to rethink their strategies, approaches, and develop new mechanisms for adaptation. One way to navigate and thrive in the BANI ecosystem is by becoming an organization that embodies agility. According to Holbeche (2023), being an agile organization one that continuously aligns its business strategy with an ever-evolving environment is a crucial factor for achieving sustainable business success (Holbeche, 2023). To adopt agility,

organizations require leaders and teams with an agile mindset. Additionally, they need management systems and practices that support greater agility to meet the evolving demands of customers who expect products and services tailored to their preferences (Wooll, 2022). Achieving this requires effective project management that encompasses end-to-end delivery, from product conceptualization to execution, customer delivery, and ongoing support and maintenance (Breyter, 2022).

Originating primarily from the software development domain, Agile methodologies focus on iterative development cycles, incremental deliveries, continuous customer collaboration, and flexibility to adapt rapidly to change. Agile Project Management aims to execute projects by breaking them down into smaller phases, known as sprints or iterations, making them more manageable and enabling faster delivery of results (Layton et al., 2020). Thus, the Agile Manifesto was developed to offer a framework for managing tasks with high uncertainty. This manifesto includes four fundamental principles: 1). Prioritizing individuals and interactions rather than processes and tools, 2). Emphasizing working software instead of extensive documentation, 3). Valuing customer collaboration above contract negotiations, and 4). Favoring responsiveness to change over strict adherence to plans (Project Management Institute, 2017).

The core principle of agile methodology is placing customer satisfaction as the highest priority, as it is essential for delivering products and services that exceed customer expectations (Project Management Institute, 2017). The agile approach is based on the empirical control method, a decision-making process grounded in observed realities within the project (Layton et al., 2020). In the context of software development methodologies, the empirical approach proves effective for new product development, enhancement projects, and upgrades (Layton et al., 2020). Through regular reviews, necessary adjustments related to new product development, enhancements, and upgrades can be implemented promptly. Agile Project Management offers several significant advantages over the traditional Waterfall Project Management approach, including greater flexibility and stability, reduced nonproductive work, faster delivery with higher quality, improved development team performance, tighter control, and quicker failure (Layton et al., 2020).

Implementing Agile Project Management is fundamental for application development companies aiming to respond more effectively to changing customer needs. The 16th annual State of Agile report published by digital.ai indicates that many organizations are still striving to adopt agile practices (digital.ai, 2022). This report provides the most comprehensive global data for assessing agile practices, based on insights from 3,220 business and IT professionals worldwide. The survey results presented in the report highlight that culture, leadership, and consistency are the three key challenges in successfully adopting agile within an organization. The primary concerns hindering agile adoption include insufficient leadership participation (42%), lack of knowledge about agile (40%), general organizational resistance to change (40%), and inadequate management support (39%).

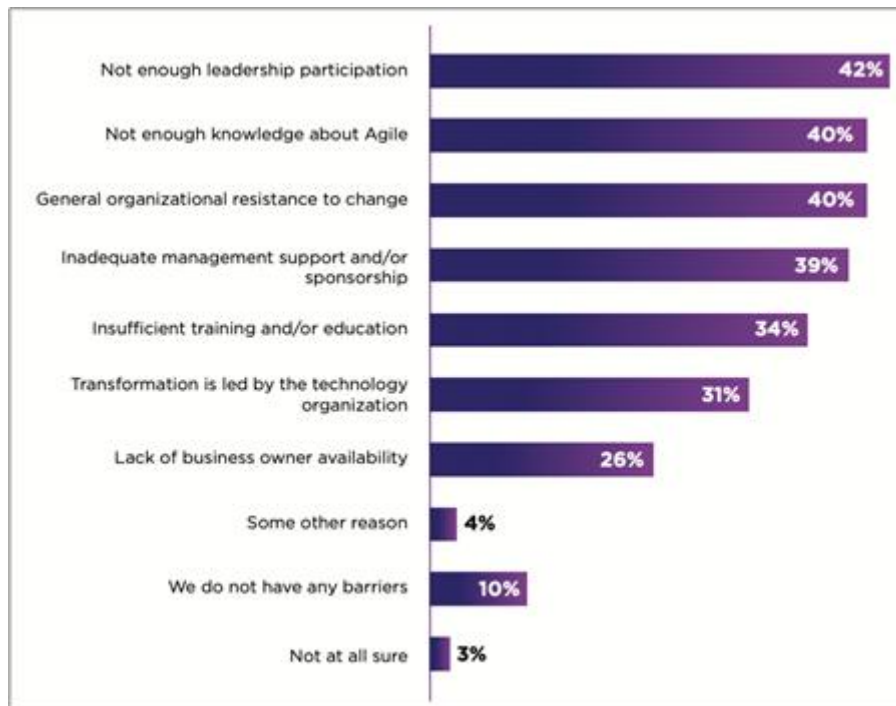


Figure 1. Challenges in Adoption Agile

Source: ditital.ai (2022)

Considering this, we are motivated to conduct a literature review on the challenges and success factors in implementing Agile Project Management. Accordingly, the research question addressed in this study is: What are the challenges and success factors in applying Agile Project Management? This literature review aims to analyze previous research on the topic and provide recommendations for future research agendas concerning the challenges and success factors in Agile Project Management implementation.

B. METHOD

This section describes the methodology, procedures, and search strategies used for conducting the literature review in this study. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding of previous research such as the theories used, determining factors, and measurement methods applied researchers manually analyzed the selected papers. To achieve its research objectives, this study utilizes a literature review framework adapted from Tranfield et al. (2003), as it offers a thorough and systematic methodology for conducting literature reviews. The procedure comprises three main stages: planning the review (which includes defining research objectives and developing the review protocol), conducting the review (which encompasses literature search, criteria selection, quality assessment, data extraction, and synthesis), and documenting the review (which involves reporting and dissemination) (Tranfield et al., 2003). The development of the review protocol followed multiple steps, including literature search, criteria selection, quality assessment, data extraction, data synthesis, reporting, and dissemination (Tranfield et al., 2003).

1. Search Strategy

The scope of this literature search was confined to the Scopus database, which is accessible through our university library subscription. Scopus was selected due to its reputation for quality and extensive coverage, making it a frequently utilized resource for conducting literature reviews. To identify all the relevant articles from the database, we set the search strings, and included the following keywords: “agile”, “project management”, “success factor*” and “challenge*”. We used the asterisk symbol (*) to ensure that the different variations in diction across the articles were covered. To avoid limiting the scope of relevant literature, we did not impose any publication date restrictions as part of our search strategy and selection criteria.

2. Criteria Application

Following the guidelines established by Tranfield et al. (2003), we applied additional selection criteria to refine the initial search results and ensure that the included articles aligned with the research objectives. The inclusion criteria defined the conditions under which studies were selected for review, while the exclusion criteria specified the conditions for omitting studies from consideration. In this literature review, three specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. First, our review focused exclusively on published journal articles to minimize the number of inaccessible or unavailable documents. More specifically, the selected papers were required to be published in highly reputable journals within the fields of computer science, business, management, and accounting.

Second, the selected papers had to specifically focus on agile project management to align with the objectives of this literature review. Consequently, studies that did not explicitly address agile project management issues were excluded. Third, only papers written in English were considered to ensure consistency and facilitate analysis. Studies published in other languages were excluded. Additionally, no specific time frame was imposed on the publication years, allowing for the inclusion of a broad range of relevant studies in this review.

3. Study Quality Assessment

The main purpose of conducting a quality assessment is to verify the validity and reliability of the articles selected for review (Tranfield et al., 2003). To accomplish this, a simple yet structured approach was employed to assess and confirm the quality of the studies. This process involved two key steps. First, downloading and coding the selected papers. Second, conducting a preliminary review by skimming through the abstracts and full content of each paper to determine whether agile project management, along with its challenges and success factors, was the main focus of the study.

4. Data Extraction

Following the quality assessment, data were extracted and compiled into Excel spreadsheets containing key information such as article titles, author(s), year of

publication, journal or publisher name, abstracts, theoretical frameworks, research methods, and principal findings. Additionally, each study was categorized according to its specific research focus and classified based on the determinants related to the challenges and success factors in implementing Agile Project Management.

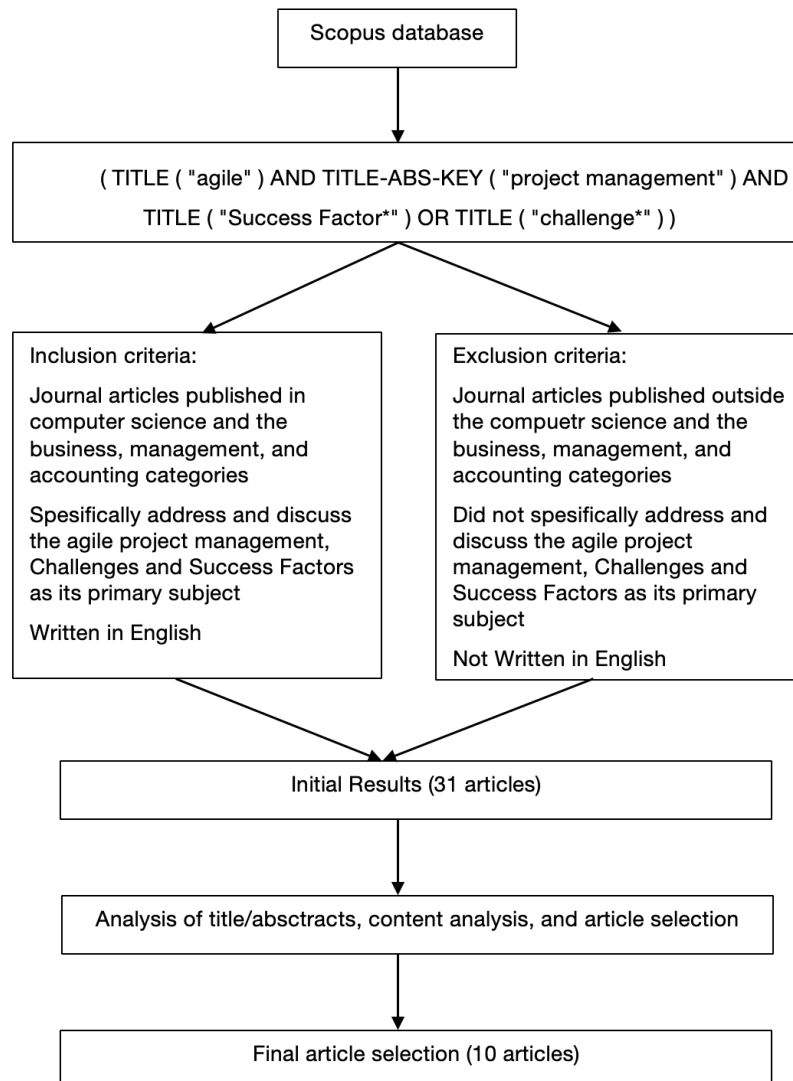


Figure 2. Process of Articles Selection

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After conducting the article review aligned with the established criteria, 10 papers in total are identified. Among these papers, 5 are related to success factors and 5 are related to challenges. Based on our analysis, the quantitative study conducted by Chow and Cao (2008), involving 109 agile software development projects from 25 countries worldwide, represents the most comprehensive research on success factors related to agile methodology implementation. Chow and Cao (2008) initiated their research by identifying a preliminary set of potential critical success factors for agile projects based on a review of existing literature. These initial factors were then refined through reliability and factor analyses, resulting in a finalized list of twelve critical success factors corresponding to four project success dimensions: Quality, Scope,

Time, and Cost. Additionally, the study explored failure factors, enhancing the understanding of how to prevent serious pitfalls essential to project success.

Research on failures or problems is commonly derived from lessons learned in specific project contexts; however, these lessons tend to exhibit similarities and are often generalizable. In this study, Chow and Cao (2008) identified 19 failure factors, which were grouped into four dimensions: Organizational, People, Process, and Technical.

According to Chow and Cao (2008), much of the research on project success found in the literature is grounded in case study analysis, meta-data, or compilations of observations from agile practices. Agile project success factors are typically categorized into five domains: organizational, people, process, technical, and project. Chow and Cao (2008) defined the overall perception of project success based on four attributes: Quality, which refers to delivering a properly functioning product; Scope, encompassing the fulfillment of all customer requirements; Time, indicating timely delivery; and Cost, representing completion within the estimated budget and effort. Coefficient alpha was applied through quantitative methods to assess internal consistency reliability. From this analysis, Chow and Cao (2008) introduced a research model that can be used as a framework for identifying the success factors and success attributes in the agile software development project. The success factors can be categorized into 5 main factors with 12 detailed factors. These factors, together with the research model, are illustrated in Figure 3.

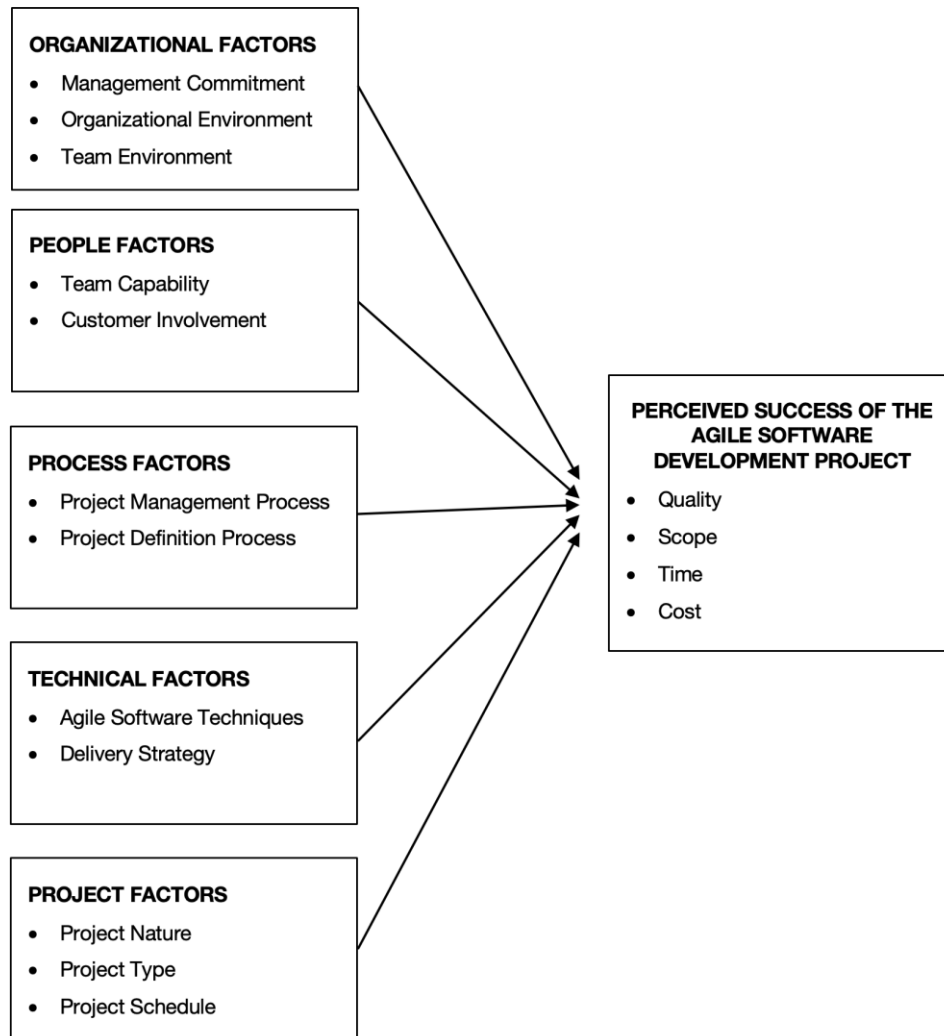


Figure 3. Research Model Introduced

Source: Chow & Cao (2008)

The five primary categories of success factors include Organizational, People, Process, Technical, and Project dimensions. Within these categories, twelve specific success factors have been identified: (1) strong management commitment, (2) an organizational environment supportive of agile practices, (3) a team environment conducive to agility, (4) high team competency, (5) active customer involvement, (6) an agile-oriented project management approach, (7) a structured project definition process, (8) agile-based software engineering techniques, (9) an appropriate delivery strategy, (10) a non-life-critical project context, (11) a variable-scope project type, and (12) a dynamic and accelerated project timeline.

Based on the multiple regression analysis, the study concluded that only three elements qualify as critical success factors: (1) the implementation of a suitable delivery strategy, (2) the proper use of Agile software engineering practices, and (3) the presence of a high-performing team. Three other factors that could be critical to certain success dimensions are found to be (1) a good Agile project management process, (2) an Agile-friendly team environment, and (3) a strong customer involvement. Chow and Cao (2008) also suggested that it could be beneficial to

replicate this study after five and ten years to determine whether new factors have emerged or if previously identified critical success factors are no longer essential.

Tsoy and Staples (2021) modified the original framework by adopting the findings of Chow and Cao's study as a foundational reference. To validate the revised list of success factors, they analyzed empirical data derived from case studies of four analytics projects with varying levels of performance, using the attributes of the identified success factors as the basis for analysis. Their findings revealed that (1) strong customer involvement and (2) a structured project definition process were the two most critical success factors for Agile analytics projects. Notably, both factors were found to be lacking in low-performing projects and prominently present in high-performing ones (Tsoy & Staples, 2021).

Zhang, Abdullah, and Rosli (2025) conducted a study using the Fuzzy Delphi Method (FDM) to refine and validate a model of Critical Success Factors (CSFs) for Agile software projects. Building on prior research, the authors initially identified 34 success factors categorized into six dimensions: Organization, People, Process, Project, Team, and Customer. Through multiple rounds of expert evaluations using FDM, the model was refined to 28 key CSFs, with the Project dimension ranked as the most critical, followed by People and Organization. The findings indicate that clear project scope, resource allocation, and effective team competency are central to Agile project success. The study highlights that in Agile software development, both technical execution and human factors play crucial roles, with project-specific considerations often outweighing rigid adherence to standard Agile frameworks (Zhang et al., 2025).

Pacagnella Jr., da Silva, and Aquino Jr. (2024) conducted an empirical study to identify and analyze the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) that influence Agile software development projects. The study synthesized prior research and categorized 25 CSFs into five key groups: Project, People, Organizational, Process, and Cultural factors. Using a quantitative survey approach and structural equation modeling (SEM), the authors found that all five categories significantly contribute to Agile project success, with Project factors (e.g., clear goals, adaptive planning) and People factors (e.g., team expertise, collaboration, and motivation) having the greatest impact. The study underscores the importance of aligning Agile practices with organizational culture and ensuring robust team capabilities to maximize success. Furthermore, findings suggest that a combination of structured project management and flexibility in execution is key to Agile effectiveness, reinforcing the notion that Agile success is contingent on both process discipline and adaptability (Pacagnella Junior et al., 2024).

Yousef (2022) investigated the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) that influence the success of Agile projects in the Gaza Strip, aiming to determine which factors significantly impact project outcomes in a resource-constrained environment. Using a quantitative survey methodology, the study collected data from 109 Agile practitioners and applied statistical analysis to identify key CSFs. The results revealed that seven factors scope and cost management, leadership, Agile analytics techniques, customer involvement, teamwork, planning and scheduling, and effective communication were the strongest predictors of Agile project success. Among these,

scope and cost management, along with planning and scheduling, had the most substantial influence on project success, explaining 67.7% of the variance in project outcomes. The findings emphasize that while Agile promotes adaptability, rigorous planning, financial control, and structured leadership remain crucial for ensuring successful implementation, particularly in challenging economic and operational contexts like the Gaza Strip (Yousef, 2022).

Boehm and Turner (2005) investigated the challenges that traditional development organizations face when transitioning to Agile methodologies, focusing on the conflicts between Agile principles and conventional management practices. Through a qualitative workshop-based study, the authors identified three primary areas of conflict: development process conflicts, business process conflicts, and people conflicts. Development process conflicts arise from the incompatibility between Agile's iterative approach and traditional structured processes, while business process conflicts stem from misalignments in budgeting, contracting, and documentation expectations. The most significant challenges, however, are people-related issues, including resistance to change, shifting team roles, and cultural barriers within organizations accustomed to hierarchical decision-making. The study concludes that managers must adopt creative strategies to align Agile with existing governance structures while fostering an Agile mindset within teams and leadership. Without proactive management of these conflicts, Agile adoption in traditional settings is likely to face resistance and reduced effectiveness (Boehm & Turner, 2005).

Astridita, Raharjo, and Fitriani (2024) conducted a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the integration of Capability Maturity Model Integration (CMMI) with Agile project management, focusing on both its benefits and challenges. The study analyzed 23 scientific articles using the PRISMA methodology, revealing that CMMI enhances Agile project management by improving process maturity, quality assurance, risk management, and structured governance. However, the study also identified key challenges in integrating the two frameworks, including resource constraints, organizational resistance, balancing Agile flexibility with CMMI's structured approach, and knowledge gaps among practitioners. The findings suggest that successful integration requires a tailored strategy, strong leadership support, and adaptive implementation to maintain Agile's responsiveness while benefiting from CMMI's process discipline. The study concludes that a hybrid approach combining Agile's adaptability with CMMI's structured methodologies can enhance project management maturity, but organizations must navigate cultural and operational challenges to achieve a seamless implementation (Astridita et al., 2024).

Sithambaram, Nasir, and Ahmad (2021) conducted a grounded theory study to investigate the challenges affecting the successful management of Agile-hybrid projects, given the increasing adoption of Agile methodologies across various industries. Through multiple rounds of interviews with 42 industry practitioners, the study identified 38 unique issues that were categorized into Organization, People, Process, and Technical challenges. The findings reveal that the most critical challenges include lack of executive sponsorship, misalignment between Agile methods and

business objectives, inadequate understanding of Agile principles, poor teamwork, and insufficient skill sets among project stakeholders. The study proposes a mitigation framework, offering strategies such as stronger executive buy-in, better Agile training, improved governance structures, and more flexible process adaptation to enhance the success of Agile-hybrid projects. The authors conclude that while Agile methods offer adaptability, their effectiveness depends on proactive change management, stakeholder alignment, and continuous learning efforts to address the complexities of hybrid project environments (Sithambaram et al., 2021).

Sharma, Luthra, Joshi, and Joshi (2022) examined the challenges to Agile project management during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of emerging economies. Using a systematic literature review and expert validation, the study applied the Fuzzy DEMATEL (Decision-Making Trial and Evaluation Laboratory) method to analyze the interrelationships among various Agile project challenges. The findings identified skepticism toward the new way of working as the most influential barrier, exacerbating other challenges such as poor stakeholder coordination, lack of Agile expertise, ineffective communication, and disruptions in workflow due to remote work adaptations. The study highlighted that, despite Agile's emphasis on flexibility, the sudden shift to remote and distributed work environments strained Agile teams, revealing gaps in digital infrastructure and collaboration practices. The authors concluded that organizations in emerging economies need stronger digital transformation strategies, improved virtual collaboration tools, and more structured Agile training programs to mitigate similar disruptions in the future (Sharma et al., 2022).

Bahi, Gharib, and Gahi (2024) explored the potential of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in enhancing Agile software development and addressing common project management challenges. The study conducted a conceptual analysis of Agile methodologies and identified key areas where AI-driven tools could optimize Agile workflows, automate repetitive tasks, and improve decision-making. The findings suggest that Generative AI can contribute to Agile success by enhancing backlog refinement, automating code generation and testing, improving sprint planning through predictive analytics, and facilitating documentation and knowledge sharing. However, the authors also caution that while AI can augment Agile practices, it does not replace essential Agile principles such as human collaboration, stakeholder involvement, and iterative development. The study concludes that successful integration of AI into Agile requires a balanced approach, where AI supports but does not dominate the Agile decision-making process (Bahi et al., 2024).

This systematic literature review provides a comprehensive synthesis of recent studies examining critical success factors (CSFs) and challenges in Agile project management. Despite variations across different contexts and studies, a clear pattern emerges regarding factors essential for Agile success. Executive sponsorship and supportive leadership are consistently highlighted as foundational (Chow & Cao, 2008; Pacagnella Jr., da Silva, & Aquino Jr., 2024; Yousef, 2022). Leadership support significantly influences organizational willingness to adapt to Agile practices,

providing the essential resources, decision-making empowerment, and cultural shift necessary for successful Agile adoption.

Effective teamwork, characterized by technical competence, motivation, and collaborative spirit, also emerges as indispensable (Pacagnella Jr. et al., 2024; Chow & Cao, 2008). Agile teams rely on collective capabilities, continuous learning, and adaptability to manage rapidly changing requirements. Correspondingly, active customer involvement significantly enhances project alignment with customer expectations, reinforcing the Agile value of collaboration and continuous feedback (Tsoy & Staples, 2021).

Effective communication—both within the team and with stakeholders—consistently emerges as a success factor intertwined with the above elements. Agile methods introduce practices (daily stand-ups, reviews, retrospectives) to promote constant information sharing. Studies confirm that high communication frequency and quality correlate with better coordination and problem-solving in Agile projects. In Yousef's (2022) survey, for example, effective communication was among the top factors explaining variance in project success.

In addition to people and collaboration aspects, process discipline within Agile execution is highlighted in several studies as a pivotal success factor. At first glance, "discipline" might sound contradictory to Agile's flexible ethos, but the literature clarifies that successful Agile projects strike a balance between adaptability and rigor. Teams need to faithfully follow core Agile practices (such as time-boxed iterations, regular testing, and continuous integration) while remaining adaptable to change. Consistent adherence to an Agile framework (Scrum, XP, etc.) and iterative delivery practices ensures that the benefits of agility (fast feedback, incremental progress) are actually realized in practice. Indeed, one finding of the Pacagnella et al. (2024) study was that a combination of structured project management and flexibility in execution is key to Agile effectiveness.

However, literature also consistently identifies significant adoption barriers. Organizational resistance to Agile methods and cultural skepticism remain prevalent, often hindering Agile transformations (Sharma et al., 2022; Sithambaram et al., 2021). Traditional management practices and structures frequently clash with Agile's iterative, flexible approaches, causing conflicts in governance, budgeting, and decision-making processes (Boehm & Turner, 2005). Similarly, lack of adequate Agile training and limited stakeholder understanding undermine project effectiveness and sustainability. Challenges intensify particularly in hybrid or scaled Agile contexts, where complexities in coordination and communication between multiple teams or departments frequently arise (Sithambaram et al., 2021; Astridita, Raharjo, & Fitriani, 2024).

The analysis suggests organizations achieve optimal Agile success when actively balancing the promotion of CSFs while simultaneously anticipating and addressing common challenges. Embracing Agile therefore requires comprehensive change management strategies, organizational alignment of Agile processes,

leadership engagement, and appropriate training programs to foster an Agile-supportive environment.

D. CONCLUSION

This systematic review highlights that Agile project success is not merely determined by methodology choice, but by how effectively organizations nurture enabling success factors and proactively manage adoption challenges. Key enabling factors such as strong executive support, collaborative team dynamics, consistent customer involvement, effective communication, and disciplined Agile practices must be purposefully cultivated. Conversely, organizations must actively mitigate common obstacles, particularly organizational resistance, lack of adequate Agile training, insufficient alignment between Agile and existing business processes, and coordination issues in large-scale implementations. Organizations adopting Agile should therefore strategically invest in building leadership buy-in, fostering an Agile-friendly culture, enhancing team capabilities, and ensuring continuous stakeholder engagement. Tailoring Agile methods to fit organizational contexts, embracing hybrid approaches where necessary, and maintaining a balance between flexibility and structured project governance are recommended strategies to maximize Agile's benefits and achieve sustained project success.

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