“People as our most important asset”
A critical exploration of agility and employee commitment

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Published in:
Project Management Journal

DOI:
10.1177/87569728221077013

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
https://doi.org/10.1177/87569728221077013

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People as Our Most Important Asset:
A Critical Exploration of Agility and Employee Commitment

Project Management Journal. 53, 3, s. 219-235 17 s. DOI: 10.1177/87569728221077013

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Abstract

In this article, we examine how employees experience different types of work commitment at an IT consultancy company using agility to give staff greater autonomy and decision-making latitude. We analyze its agile practices through an in-depth case study comprising interviews and non-participative observation of managers and employees, concluding that the company aims to increase autonomy and decision-making latitude by introducing agile approaches to project management, but thereby risks eroding its employees’ commitment. Indeed, the new social dynamics engender new professional insecurities and decision-making passivity and appear to lack a clear organizational purpose, thus challenging certain aspects of employee commitment.

Keywords
agility, organizational commitment, affective commitment, normative commitment, autonomy, new ways of organizing, future of work, knowledge work, dialectics, paradox

Introduction

Agile approaches to project management have proved an appealing alternative to traditional management techniques. Rooted in the software industry, such management has gained popularity in both the public and the private sectors, becoming embedded in companies, large and small (Niederman et al., 2018). Compared to traditional approaches, agile approaches are more dynamic and adaptive, seem to distribute greater responsibility to team members, and entail more stakeholder inclusion (Gemino et al., 2021). Despite these advantages, however,
they have yet to gain much critical recognition (Hodgson & Briand, 2013; Houlfort et al., 2013; Niederman et al., 2018).

Proponents of agility often consider it to have become a core competency and competitive advantage that requires innovative thinking and a proactive, adaptive mindset. Harraf et al. (2015) say: “Agility thus becomes a business imperative for survival rather than choice” (Harraf et al., 2015, p. 675). It is also said to be emancipatory, moving beyond hierarchical control and engendering fulfilling work that can liberate initiative and creativity in workers, especially knowledge workers (Peters, 1992; Roy & Audet, 2003). Research praising agile approaches to project management often focuses on how they impact innovation, competition, and change management perspectives (e.g., Cohen et al., 2014; Saridakis et al., 2020) and how they have increased productivity and efficiency (in Niederman et al., 2018). Jønsson and Jeppesen (2013) also investigate how employee influence on company practice affects commitment. They suggest that a team’s influence may stimulate employees’ individual influence and, in turn, their affective commitment if their normative commitment is low. Indeed, because giving employees greater autonomy and influence is a central concern of agile approaches to project management, a company needs employee participation and influence to foster commitment and performance.

Other scholars have heavily criticized these very business models as creating new types of inequality and unfair working conditions (e.g., Scholz, 2016). Niederman et al. (2018) review project management research that also critically reflects on the principles and values of agile practices. They report that Rakitin (2001) and Levine (2005) show the interpretation of agility as prone to ambiguity and suggest that, depending on how applied, agile practices can lead to successful outcomes (Niederman et al., 2018). Generally, the project-based approach to organization has also raised concerns about the presence of stronger managerial control (Clegg & Courpasson, 2004; Hodgson, 2004). Accordingly, although some scholars are for and others against, as dialectic and paradox management has shown, new approaches often have positive and negative sides simultaneously (e.g., Putnam et al., 2016). Indeed, the key characteristic of paradox is “the simultaneous presence of contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements” (Quinn & Cameron, 1988, p. 2). It is not a matter of either or but that “most management practices create their own nemesis” (Clegg et al., 2002, p. 491). Organizational tensions are
often addressed interchangeably as paradoxes or dialectics, but project managers may need to be aware of and pursue certain nuances. “Whereas paradox research depicts tensions between contradictory elements as irreconcilable and best managed through acceptance and synergy, the dialectical perspective portrays the relationship of such elements as adversarial and transformed through conflict” (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017, p. 319). In this article, which is oriented toward human behavior, we apply a relational perspective to these tensions (Clegg et al., 2002), seeing both paradox and dialectics as complex tensions that project managers can approach through dialogue and negotiations or conflict, and so we use the terms interchangeably.

Studying social dynamics, which is central to well-being and commitment, can provide a nuanced understanding of dialectics in all their complexity. Although well-being and commitment are rarely researched in the field of agile approaches to project management, many critical management scholars have urged caution with regard to how this trend impacts work quality (e.g., Thompson & Briken, 2017; Spencer, 2018). Highsmith (2002), for example, has suggested the need to develop a chaordic ecosystem, as it takes into account not only the chaotic environment that increasing complexity produces in organizations, but also the people living and working within that environment. Agile approaches to project management can be seen as means of governing this increased complexity and the potential dialectics that come with it, but their effects on workers require further investigation. The fact that a project management approach facilitates individual contributions makes understanding the psychological effect of agile practices important (Malik et al., 2021), as more needs to be understood about the new roles, responsibilities, and interaction hierarchies of agile approaches as well as their impact on employees’ well-being and commitment (Houlfort et al., 2013; Niederman et al., 2018; Saridakis et al., 2020). Still, some aspects of agile behavioral attributes have been explored, especially in relation to the success of project outcomes (Annosi et al., 2020; Caniëls et al., 2019; Malik et al., 2021).

For example, a recent study by Malik et al. (2021) investigates employees’ active engagement in agile projects. Psychological empowerment increases the likelihood that a team will engage with and influence project outcomes, a necessary precondition for innovative outcomes. Taking a cognitive theoretical approach (intrinsic motivation theory and the job characteristic model [JCM]), Malik et al. (2021) examine how and why agile project tasks and practices generate employees’ affective reactions and active team involvement. Meaningfulness, autonomy, and feedback are keys to nurturing employee commitment. Malik et al. (2021) depart from the
premise that agile techniques are “inherently motivating because they engage and involve the team members and create an active orientation towards the project” (Malik et al., 2021, p. 2). However, taking a project management approach with a single-minded focus on the positive aspects of work commitment risks a blindness to the potential dark sides, such as a critique of internal work conditions that, for example, intensify work (Dupret & Pultz, 2021). Such an approach also risks the loss of information vital for project managers to do their work. In this article, we scrutinize the dialectics of agile approaches to project management through the prism of commitment theory, thus investigating the social dynamics affected. The following research question is posed: “What effects do the pluses and minuses of agility have on affective, normative, and continuance commitments?” This opens up for a more detailed, microlevel examination of the actual governance practices enacted in employees’ daily lives (Lappi et al., 2018). As such, we refrain from evaluating the costs of transitioning from traditional project management approaches to agile ones, nor do we focus on the potential of streamlining or scalability (Niederman et al., 2018).

Empirically, the strong commitment culture in our case company awakened our initial curiosity about microlevel practices. The company’s agile ideology seemed to foster a high level of individual commitment. We wanted to explore how this is played out in daily practice, drawing inspiration from the principles of the manifesto for agile software development commonly known as the Agile Manifesto, which invite different views of organizational behavior (Beck et al., 2001). The agile claim of “people as our most important asset” prompted us to critically explore the company’s cultural atmosphere—more specifically how the agility themes are also drawn upon from the Agile Manifesto; in other words, autonomy, hierarchy, and honesty are dynamics central to managing agile projects. To scrutinize the inherent dialectics of agility, we approach all four agile dimensions from both positive and negative perspectives. Overall, we aim to probe the dynamics of agile approaches to project management and the associated organizational behavioral dimensions. By tapping into organizational psychology, this article adds to new organizational behavior research (e.g., Malik et al., 2021) addressing agile approaches to project management.
Theoretical and Analytical Framework—Agility and Commitment

This section seeks to clarify the theoretical basis of the analysis, which draws on agile values that mirror the Agile Manifesto and play out in our empirical work and commitment theory.

What Are the Core Values of Agile Approaches to Project Management?
Since 2001, agility has been a multidimensional concept with numerous interpretations (e.g., Moe et al., 2010; Rubin, 2013), and agile approaches to project management have been described as a combination of many approaches (Zasa et al., 2021). Although gaining a foothold in industries beyond software development (Appelbaum et al., 2017a, 2017b; Niederman et al., 2018), Neiderman et al. (2018) acknowledge that agile approaches lack theory: “Movement toward a theory-oriented approach would mark a transition from a more design and engineering approach to a more behavioral science orientation” (p. 6).

How are agile values connected to organizational behavior and, more specifically, work commitment? Beck et al. (2001) published the Agile Manifesto laying out the common philosophy, shared values, and guiding principles of agile approaches. The Agile Manifesto developers were driven by “a set of values based on trust and respect for each other and promoting organizational models based on people, collaboration, and building the types of organizational communities in which we would want to work. [It is] about delivering good products to customers by operating in an environment that does more than talk about ‘people as our most important asset’ but actually ‘acts’ as if people were the most important … the meteoric rise of interest in and sometimes tremendous criticism of – Agile Methodologies is about the mushy stuff of values and culture” (Highsmith, 2001, p.1).

The Agile Manifesto states that most value exists in individuals and interactions, but also acknowledges that some inheres in software development processes and tools (Lappi et al., 2018). The Agile Manifesto includes four principles: (1) individuals and interactions over processes and tools, (2) working software over comprehensive documentation, (3) customer collaboration over contract negotiation, and (4) responses to change over following a plan. These four values can be translated into not only a set of tools, but also and especially into social dynamics that affect commitment.
Introducing and implementing agility is a complex process, ranging from a superficial level of work destined to be short-lived to a thorough integration of agility within the firm (Cram & Newell, 2016). While recognizing this complexity, one should be aware that agility has also been developed as a critique of traditional mainstream hierarchical arrangements. The aforementioned values reflect a fundamentally new way of approaching project management, not only generally but also more specifically with respect to how these values affect such management. Agile approaches to project management imply fundamental changes in how organizations and employees work, and agile approaches seem more socially oriented in their approach to project management and software development than traditional approaches (Moe et al., 2010). This said, in this article we rearticulate the criticism of agile approaches to project management themselves, as implementing agile values is dialectic.

**Connecting Agility With Work Commitment**

Niederman et al. (2018) emphasize the necessity of theory in agile approaches to project management research. By theory they mean testable general statements about the relationships between project elements developed for the purpose of rigorous empirical testing. Indeed, they see value in the engineering and proof of concept research, which can provide an empirical basis of understanding. However, while a practice can be shown to potentially create value, it doesn’t mean it automatically will.

Commitment is defined as a force that binds an individual to a target (social or nonsocial) and to a course of action relevant to that target (Meyer et al., 2006). The concepts “commitment” and “organizational commitment” (OC) date back to the 1950s (Becker, 1960; Gouldner, 1960) and refer to consistency in people’s behavior toward other people, institutions, or organizations. Work commitment comprises several dimensions, including work ethic, commitment to a career or profession, job involvement, and organizational commitment (Morrow, 2011). OC is defined as the degree to which an individual’s relationships and experiences instill a sense of loyalty to one’s organization and entails an individual’s willingness to expend effort to advance an organization’s goals—and, conversely, how well the organization’s goals and values align with those of the individual (Mowday et al., 1979).

The evolution of OC concepts can be categorized into several theories (Ghosh & Swamy, 2014). Early studies, based, for example, on Becker’s (1960) side-bet theory, focused on the interest
of remunerating employees. These studies progressed to Porter et al.’s (1974) affective dependence theory, which specifically draws on psychological attachment to the organization, and onward to O’Reilley and Chatman (1986), Meyer and Allen’s multidimension theory (e.g., 1991, 1997), and further developments within the field. Each of these explains the concept differently and has strongly impacted the present status of OC (Ghosh & Swamy, 2014).\(^1\) To this should be added that Gouldner (1960) was able to empirically distinguish commitment to an organization’s specific values from commitment to the organization itself. Likewise, Reichers (1985) argues that employees can be committed to different foci of an organization. Thus, a unidimensional OC perspective does not really exist (Saridakis et al., 2020).

The multidimensional aspects of affective, continuance, and normative commitment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer & Allen, 1991; 1997) can be explained as follows:

1. Affective commitment, in which an employee desires to be part of the organization, expressing a wish for acceptance in the organization or group and for a sense of belonging to it. Such commitment concerns “employees’ emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization” (Meyer & Allen 1991, p. 67). Highly affectively committed employees remain members of the organization simply because they want to (Meyer & Allen, 1997). Affective commitment is closely related to social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

2. Continuance commitment, in which an employee believes that leaving an organization comes at too high a risk to their established membership and continuous efforts in the organization. It refers to the perceived costs of leaving an organization or the risk of losing valued “side bets” (Becker, 1960). Continually committed employees stay in the organization because they have to until a better or more suitable employment opportunity arises elsewhere (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

3. Normative commitment, in which an employee expresses a high sense of responsibility to the organization and its mission on the basis of their personal values and beliefs (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Normatively committed employees stay in an organization because they believe they ought to (Meyer & Allen, 1997).

\(^1\) Further, literature reviews of OC have also been done by Ghosh and Swamy (2014) and Saridakis et al. (2020).
OC has continuously been developed and discussed in relation to affiliated theories of human attachment and motivation. For example, Meyer et al. (2006) have discussed the relations between commitment and social identity. Although diverging, both commitment and social identity involve seeing oneself as part of a larger whole and are complex, multifaceted concepts characterized by mindsets (cognitive and affective) that link the individual to a collective and influence behavior toward that collective (Meyer et al., 2006). However, commitment is directed at not only social but also nonsocial targets, such as jobs, goals, and courses of action (Meyer et al., 2006), which is an important factor when one discusses OC in relation to experiences of working with agile mindsets and approaches.

Method

This article draws on empirical work included in the multistakeholder research project investigating the future of knowledge work, its potentials and pitfalls. One of the case partners, an IT consultancy (23 employees, six of whom are partners), has highly specialized staff, or knowledge workers (Alvesson, 2001), most of whom have academic backgrounds, although some are self-taught software programmers. To explore the research question, we conducted in-depth interviews with 14 staff members in 2018, seeking to understand people’s perspectives on their agile practices and the affiliated commitments. Adhering to critical research methodologies (Despret, 2004), we aimed from the outset to enable the informants to question and challenge our preconceptions of how agility would affect work life.

Looking to develop the organization in step with surrounding demands and technological changes while also focusing on employee well-being, the organization has applied the agile mindset and methods internally in its project management and externally with customers. As such, the case company is moving beyond using agile approaches to project management merely to address software development. Moreover, as Ktata and Lévesque (2009) suggest, the agile processes of software design interconnect business processes to a greater degree than

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2 anonymized—naming the research project
software is intended to support, so the company is aiming to scale its agile practices at the organizational level.

Companies undertaking agile transformation processes are often said to be hybrid in multiple ways (Gemino et al., 2021). Different elements of the old and new organizational practices live more or less compatibly alongside each other (Dupret, 2010). This case organization, as such, is committed to agility, and the agility mindset affects the entire organizational culture. The reorientation process the company undertook toward an agile culture was ostensibly sparked by its merger with another company about six years ago. The yearly team-building trip accentuated the wish to find common ground with regard to internal organizing and project management, which kick-started the process of determining how to emphasize the agile mindset in every aspect of the organizational culture and project management. Although staff mutually agreed to strive for more explicit agile approaches to project management and agility in the company, this change and learning process has been neither linear nor free of tension. We introduce some central characteristics of hybridity of the case here.

The business case exemplifies hybridity in that its traditional, hierarchical structure remains sharply defined by the CEO and the partners. In some situations, this structure resembles a change control board called on in its capacity as a board of (external project) experts (e.g., senior software developers or testing experts) and managers (e.g., quality assurance managers) who decide whether to implement the proposed project changes (Dikert et al. 2016). Also, project managers within the organization interpret “agile” differently, with some being more oriented to intuitively applying the “agile mindset,” both with regard to team participants and customers, whereas others tend to use concrete tools besides interteam coordination. In the analysis we elaborate on how these differences also have a senior/junior perspective in the sense that whether projects are managed sufficiently is informally evaluated through the social interactions in the company. Moreover, the different approaches project managers take to agility make negotiating how to manage and culturally develop projects both interesting and paralyzing.

The question of hybridity is also relevant to customer relations. For example, when the company negotiates with customers “on the floor,” agile ways of working may be in sync, but the company also encounters tensions related to the need to collaborate with different levels of the customer organization (e.g., management or legal departments) not always following agile approaches to project management principles. Such tensions are often resolved through
continuous dialogue and the tedious, explicit alignment of expectations in terms of managing and allocating the budget, time, and scope of projects. However, the case company also had to deal with non-agile criteria, such as a preplanned price or scope that the customer organization’s top management kept mandatory, thus forcing the company to overrule its own project management and itself in general. In this article we scrutinize how these tensions result in new types of social dynamics and work commitments. In Table 1 we provide with an overview of the interviewees of the case company.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics, Case Company

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soren P.*</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Partner, CEO</td>
<td>Self-taught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John P.*</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Partner, Project manager</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara P.*</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Partner, Project Manager</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael P.*</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Partner, Project Manager</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon P.*</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Partner, Project Manager</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave P.*</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Partner, Software Developer</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia L.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>Self-taught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry L.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>Self-taught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica L</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric L.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam V.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>Self-taught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil V.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan V.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>Self-taught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy V.</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>Self-taught</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summary</strong></td>
<td>14 (11 men, 3 women)</td>
<td>*participated in focus group interview and individual interviews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coding Process
Relating the question of agile organizational change to well-being and commitment at work, we coded the material in which employees describe what it means for them to work agilely and how they experience working in the studied organization. All qualitative interviews were conducted in Danish and then translated directly, although with some minor deviations for clarity. The interviews were coded in NVivo12, a process that involved identifying places in
the empirical material where employees challenge the degree to which the case company actually works agilely, and where employees critically reflect on agile principles. It ultimately became clear that the agile transition was a multilayered and tedious process in which the employees’ and partners’ main concerns were not the actual use of agile approaches, but rather the mindset itself, the learning processes around understanding participation, decision-making, and autonomy. On this basis, the research team extensively discussed the key categories for exploring how agile approaches to project management affect staff and focused on developing specific analytical categories—work that entailed closely scrutinizing the staff perspective. The analytical categories played a central role as we examined how employees experience agility and how this relates to different aspects of OC. After selecting analytical themes and highlights, we presented them in collaborative research workshops for the organization’s staff for the purposes of ensuring relevance and allowing critical comment. At the workshops, we presented the themes and theoretical categorizations, along with anonymized interview material to provide examples. The excerpts analyzed thus exemplify an analytical point in each analysis section.

**Structure of Analysis**

When the relational perspective is in focus, the kinds of paradoxes prevalent in organizations are often connected with freedom and control (Clegg et al., 2002). Agile approaches to project management can be seen to reconfigure this fundamental paradox, as they aim in new ways to free subjectivity while constraining order at the individual, team, and organizational levels. At the individual analysis level, this study focuses on the work commitment aspects of agile practices but also strongly relates to the team/group level, as the practices addressed here—such as decision-making latitude, feelings of autonomy, and work commitment—are largely socially defined and analyzed through the various lenses of work commitment. Factors pertaining to individual team members, such as skills and motivation, characterize the individual level (Niederman et al., 2018), whereas the team/project level refers to factors addressing how groups of individuals are organized to collaborate on and integrate work (Niederman et al., 2018). However, the organizational level is arguably included both from an organizational behavioral perspective and from an outcome perspective (how the employee experience interrelates with the alignment of organizational strategy and an overall aim to comply with agile organizing principles) (Niederman et al., 2018).
Analyzing agile practices from a project management and governance perspective implies that, in some sense, agile practices essentially shift the control of work from rules and checklists to roles and responsibilities, which tend to be relatively fixed, unambiguous, and stable in the traditional practice environment but more flexible and varied in the agile environment (Niederman et al., 2018). As the analysis will show, some employees embrace this change, whereas others are deeply affected by the unclarity they perceive the organizational change to have caused.

The analysis is structured to oscillate between the theoretical OC resources and how staff experience the agile work practices to have affected their social relations. Most social dynamics are complex, often involving dialectics. We sought to show this complexity by describing how the same values core to agile approaches to project management can produce differing social dynamics and ways of committing to work and an organization. The reader will find an overview of the analytical structure in Table 2.

*Table 2. Analytical Structure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialectic Dimensions of Social Dynamics and Commitment in Agile Approaches to Project Management</th>
<th>Agile dimension</th>
<th>The agile mindset creates tensions</th>
<th>Dimension of commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“People as our most important asset”</td>
<td>“Whole people” is the quintessence of intimacy and inclusiveness versus a culture of elitism and high-performance goals.</td>
<td>Affective commitment—strong sense of belonging  Continuance commitment —am I good enough to belong here?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Strong ties with clients constructed as the antidote to mainstream sales culture versus staff being constantly exposed when required to present prototypes and unfinished sketches. It challenges feelings of professionalism and creates new types of insecurities.</td>
<td>Affective commitment toward internal organization and extended to external partners  Enforces an in-group social identity and strengthening an overall OC  Challenges affective commitment if internal support is felt as insecure  Challenges continuance and normative commitment—do I want to submit to this kind of pressure?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat hierarchy</td>
<td>Networking across the organization and new affiliations are created through equality. Also paves the way for renegotiating (old) power structures versus informal struggles regarding authority.</td>
<td>Affective commitment—potentially anyone has a say  Normative and continuance commitment— insecurity about how decisions are made and how right and wrong ways of project management are defined in practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Experienced colleagues are accessible and support individuals’ own ideas versus new types of individually based (professional) insecurities.</td>
<td>Affective commitment—a sense of respect toward senior colleagues versus feeling potentially excluded and not belonging among the elite  Normative—encouraging sharing own ideas as a positive norm  Continuance commitment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analysis—Four Dimensions of Social Dynamics and Commitment

The *Agile Manifesto* establishes themes like “people as an important asset,” honesty, a flat hierarchy, and autonomy. These themes that are described as core values in the Agile Manifesto provide the analysis its structure. However, these themes are not neutral. As the empirical complexity of the case has shown this raises some dialectics, which we explore below.

“People as Our Most Important Asset”

“Whole People”—Not Just Staff Members

From our first visit to the IT consultancy, we were struck by the atmosphere at the company, which is scenically located in an affluent area of Copenhagen and decorated in the style of a private home, with a 1950s couch, oversized armchairs, and living-room lamps. Slippers are available at the entryway, and we often encountered software developers lost in their work as they lounged on the sofas, feet up, computers on their laps. The walls are plastered with a gallery of photos depicting staff members and their families from different excursions and events. Lead partners say that the case company’s main objective is to be the best workplace for (explicitly phrased) “whole people” and not just staff members. A *holistic approach*, they term it. Scrolling through the company’s website, we encountered descriptions of not only functions, specializations, and professional backgrounds, but also private interests. The staff presentation indeed appeared highly inclusive and diverse, focusing on the whole and not merely the professional person.

More traditional organizations also employ team-building strategies and jointly formulate their mission as a means of inviting employees to identify with and feel loyal to the organization. Conjuring family life and behavior is an important aspect of mimicking the home and enhancing freedom and a sense of belongingness and inclusion, all of which potentially intensify affective commitment. Although particular to agile organizations as such, this casual atmosphere can also be seen in small and medium-sized software companies and startups. However, a homey atmosphere also enacts and frames how to understand the agile catch phrase “people as our most important asset.” Similarly, Wijeweera et al. (2014) conclude in their study on knowledge sharing that a friendly, noncompetitive work atmosphere and certain cultural values harking to clan-type cultures of collaboration are more likely to increase trust-related behaviors among project managers. As the following shows, the key values of agile approaches to project
management all center on human behavior, which makes the new dynamics of how such organizing affects social relationships and commitment interesting.

Excellence and Perfection

In themselves, agile approaches to project management impose no requirement to define a greater good or an overall company mission, but rather concern customer needs and how employees can develop and collaborate to respond to these quickly. An obligation to quality is apparently an essential connector for an otherwise diverse staff. As the CEO from the case company Soren P., states: “For many years our internal slogan has always been to strive to become better: the hunt for mastery!” Hence, craftsmanship, quality, and pride in work seem key to enhancing both normative and affective commitments:

“I think it’s consistent for all of us that we want to develop and to be the best. You’ve probably looked quickly at the poster [illustrating the consultancy values] on the first floor. It’s worth going down there and taking a look, because it tells a lot about who we are and why. It’s about this quest for perfection.” (Eric L., software developer)

Although this story speaks of pride, work commitment, and identification with the company, the ambition of being better and delivering excellent quality has a flipside, which newcomers to the organization often describe. The company practices an inclusive culture but simultaneously an exclusive performance culture, which makes employees concerned about their adequacy and sets performance criteria for gaining full membership.

The fear of disapproval or exclusion may have the opposite effect, creating reluctance and a resistance to participation that can lower affective and continuance commitment. This fear is the antithesis of agile approaches to project management, where values of high responsiveness and adaptability are contingent on the participation of autonomous and confident individuals.

A recently arrived but experienced employee expresses how her fear of nonacceptance made her refrain from participating in collective decision-making processes:

Julia L., project manager: “I think many refrain from saying anything because they may feel, ’okay, maybe I’m not on top of this.’ So, they won't say anything aloud.”

Interviewer: “Would you say there’s performance anxiety?”

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Julia L.: “Yeah, a little bit. When I started here, I talked to Soren about feeling like … ‘Gee man. Was I good enough?’ Later I found out that everyone who starts here, says that.”

Interviewer: “Okay”

Julia L.: “Well, I have almost 20 years’ work experience. And I’ve never felt unsure about my abilities before. I’ve always … been totally okay with not being able to do everything, and I just give it a go. But I’ve never doubted my own abilities. But I did when I started here.”

While agility in this company relates to an understanding of stakeholder and employee inclusion and a creation of equal partnerships, it also implies more experimentation and prototyping, which requires fast decision-making processes and the willingness to make mistakes. Despite the seemingly inclusive and tolerant milieu, the feelings of insecurity and anxiety felt by employees make them refrain from suggesting new innovations and from participating in decision-making. Moreover, when one compares the above extract with the elitist approach expressed in the previous extract, a certain dissonance with the company’s inclusive atmosphere appears, despite all the tales of in-group solidarity. The dynamics of becoming part of the company are, perhaps, not always so inclusive and “people first” after all, which may decrease employees’ normative, affective, and continuance commitments. An experienced employee’s sudden difficulty believing in their own competencies seems to be related to an organizational culture of high performance and managerial expectations of autonomy, coupled with unclear procedures on the practice of the desired flat hierarchy.

**Summing up the Dialectics of “People as Our Most Important Asset”**

When it comes to the agility principle of “people as our most important asset,” the two poles of a freedom and control dialectic may be present simultaneously, as seen with the sociomaterial enactment of intimacy and inclusiveness versus the quests for perfection and excellence. The inclusive culture that supports the approach to staff members as whole people enables and enforces an affective and continuance work commitment—a strong sense of belonging and desire to stay in the company. The inclusive culture, however, has several conditions that may challenge the positive dimensions: growth and size plus elitism and fear of failure. The former concerns how long a company can keep imitating a family culture of intimacy and informality while also continually expanding. While individual behavior can be subjected to the will of
management via normative or rational control, the organization is essentially an emergent system reacting to outside demands and possibilities (Clegg et al., 2002). Unless project managers are on steering committees or own the company, they are relatively powerless to control it. Although project managers can do little to affect employees’ feeling of commitment other than to acknowledge the presence of such tensions, they can perhaps realize a strategy not initially predictable (Clegg et al., 2002). When aiming to build an inclusive and intimate atmosphere, a company may need to make it clear that their tasks are built on particular premises—such as investors’ interests or customer expectations—that the consultancy may or may not change or deal with in specific ways. Critically, in agile approaches to project management these tensions are seldom made explicit. Instead, the potentials of emancipation and individual freedom are the focus of the agile mindset, and the shadowy sides of (self-) control, such as feelings of vulnerability and professional insecurity, are silenced.

Honesty

Boosting Self-Esteem and the Company Brand
The value of being honest is often mentioned as something the staff commend and commit to. The ambition of honesty pertains to colleagues and the organization, but honesty is also praised as a value in relation to clients. Murphy (1993) suggests that honesty means the extent to which individuals abide by consistent ethical principles regarding the obligation to respect the truth. As such, honesty relates to lying, integrity, and ethics. In this context, the staff’s narratives of honesty focus not on issues like theft or fraud, but rather compliance with the cultural expectations of job performance. Honesty thus plays a role in defining how staff perceive their colleagues and collaborators to be adhering to a set of principles they find acceptable (Mayer et al., 1995). Staff tell us that the consultancy values honesty, and that being honest and thus trustworthy is the antidote to the sales culture dominating much of the IT consultancy market. The quest for honesty therefore influences internal social dynamics and how staff members position themselves in relation to other companies. When new social identities are developed, affective commitment can also be developed in contrast to or in competition with one’s own existing social identities. These new identities enhance staff members’ self-esteem because this narrative makes them feel they improve their job expertise (Howarth, 2002). Honesty becomes a competency the company can use to differentiate itself from competitors.
In agile approaches to project management, customer needs are central, and project plans and developments are to be transparent and flexible and oriented to these needs. Particular emphasis is placed on achieving greater customer involvement and interaction with the development team (Batra, 2009; Conboy & Morgan, 2011; Jørgensen, 2016; Tessem, 2014). This agile-based involvement creates a specific social dynamic that pivots on transparency and mutual expectations. The following excerpt suggests that honesty is connected to how things are done and also to a positive feeling that enhances employee’s self-esteem as well as connects to the company’s branding:

Billy V., software developer: “You can actually honestly say, ‘listen, I'm telling you [the customers] everything. So, you're going to know about when everything is fine, you're going to know about it when something is going wrong, but you can trust us.’”

Interviewer: “Why is it particularly important right now?"

Billy V.: “Because [laughs] … [Customers] trust us blindly, but it's so nice to know, and that gives us the drive to do our best and to be honest. Especially in the IT industry, it’s a really dodgy industry because you have a lot of opportunities to lie about how much time things take and to lie about what you’re doing. … [The other IT companies] just make an offer and say: ‘We can do this for a million,’ and they know they can’t, and they get away with it every time [laughs]. Whereas, here, we’re actually trying to say: ‘Listen, you can’t get that for a million. There’s no way, but we really want to help you, and do this with you, and we really want to be with you all the way,’ and I just love that.”

The founders of agile approaches to project management suggested people first. The employee talking in the above excerpt expresses normative commitment aimed at ethically sound behavior toward customers. In other words, they should not be deceived with optimistic prices or misinformed about project requirements or financial prospects. In some readings (Pries-Heje & Baskerville, 2017), the agile mindset actually stresses transparency among team members and also in customer partnerships. Given that the customer is competent (Jørgensen, 2016), the frequent customer involvement and interactions can facilitate intrinsic project management decisions and discussions regarding any requirement changes (Conboy & Morgan, 2011). The team strongly relies on relationships, mutual trust, and involvement of the right people in the decision-making process (Persson et al., 2012). In this company, customer relations are also expressed as “partnerships” rather than customer relations or clients and, from early on,
customers are invited to join weekly project meetings, where agile practices such as sprints and prototyped sketches are discussed, and mutual decisions about the creation of so-called iterative adjustments are made. Clients are asked to take responsibility for prioritizing the elements to be worked on. Honesty is practiced through storytelling (as expressed in the above excerpt), but also through agile practices, where all stakeholders are invited to participate in the project progression, as the following accentuates:

“We’re also starting to have long-term relationships … So, the software developers need to buy into being a bigger part of a customer collaboration, I think. … Around each customer, there needs to be a more solid team structure. Because it means that we to a greater extent can work with this joint responsibility that develops when there’s a team that has worked together for a period.” (Sara P., project manager)

This “joint responsibility” requires transparency and relationship building. The software developer elaborates on this point:

“In the daily team meetings, where you talked about all the problems, challenges, and frustrations around solving the customer’s problems, so the customer stood right next to you and listened. And you just had to get used to that [in the agile project]. But that’s precisely the criterion for the customer to get a very clear understanding of what some of the challenges are. It means that we can help to reprioritize or be transparent about what we’re having a hard time achieving. It goes both ways, though. As the customer can also listen to the problems we’re facing, and they can say: ‘Well, if this function we wished for causes so many problems, then maybe I can go back to my backers and say: Listen, the developing team has quite a hard time achieving this … and then the customer says to the team: Don’t think about it, just move on to the next thing.’ … It's like a partnership, much more than it's a supplier agreement.” (Jonathan V.)

This transparency built through the ongoing nurturing of social relationships with customers makes other types of social dynamics involving distributed responsibility available, thus potentially nurturing a normative commitment to customers. Certainly, a professional has to deliver what is promised but also needs to recall the trajectory of agreements along the way. One can argue that in agile approaches to project management the ethical contract and hence the normative commitment become more mutually obligating, not only economically but also emotionally and socially, as all parties are continuously involved and agreeing on the next step.
The case company’s honesty brand is successful because client relationships are based on mutual trust and respect. This enacts a strong normative and affective commitment to delivering a high professional standard and product quality, but since all stakeholders are exposed to the process, unforeseen developments or errors are less likely to require presentation. Honesty becomes a profitable factor creating acknowledgment in the corporate culture in-house, a culture to which employees commit themselves and wish to belong to. This provides a powerful incentive to strengthen the positive OC overall and social identity in-house, as well as motivates the company to use honesty as a brand.

*Can You Sprint Yourself to New Social Competency Requirements?*

An agile mindset and approach to project management require employees to learn to use the agile toolbox (Scrum, sprints, etc.), but also imply another type of customer relationship aimed to ensure trustworthiness and transparency. Such a mindset requires employees to learn new ways of collaborating with customers. Especially because their participation in the entire developmental process as equal partners means they must understand the end product and be able to envision how sketches and prototypes can lead them to the desired solutions to given tasks and problems. Customer relationships, including non-agile ones, help build trust, but the salient feature in this case is the particularity of inviting customers on board earlier in the process. This provides them with insights into an unfinished development phase and, ultimately, giving them a co-responsibility with project managers as to how project changes are prioritized. Facilitating and engaging in such customer relationships requires agile relational and psychological competencies.

Barry L., project manager: “With my experience and project manager insight, it was hard for me to see with that small budget that we could at all satisfactorily do some of the things the clients thought they could achieve. It’s frustrating. And it’s frustrating when the customer doesn’t understand.”

Interviewer: “So, you’re not reaching a collaborative common ground?”

Barry L.: “Exactly. Or these risk assessments [in the sprint presentations] we come up with aren’t heard. Or there’s an unrealistically optimistic way of looking at the tasks. Because the customer’s technical background isn’t the same as ours.”

On the one hand, not all stakeholders in the partnership have the technical competencies and insight apparently needed to evaluate the risk assessments presented at the sprint team meetings.
In agile approaches to project management, involving customers in sprint sessions therefore seems to require a particular kind of translation. In the above instance, the customer’s idea of what can be achieved within the given economic framework frustrates the project manager because “common ground” cannot be found. This relates to honesty, as the intention of transparency requires a mutual understanding of the budget realities. Affective commitment relates to employees’ desire to be part of the organization and wish for acceptance; it is a matter of identification. When customers are invited on board as agile project partners for an extended period, the social dynamics potentially include them as quasi-members of the organization. A frustrating and conflictual customer collaboration can thus also challenge affective commitment.

On the other hand, an agile approach to project management is much more than a technical competency, as the necessary servant leadership approach entails a relational overview not involving translating technical competencies. This can cause tensions for an agile project manager, thus possibly affecting the continuance commitment of software developers in the team, who may lack the translation competencies necessary in agile approaches to project management:

“Very often there’s a very, very extensive technical discussion around a single task. … It may well be that it’s going to take the rest of the sprint meeting then. Then you have to say: ‘Is it really necessary?’ Or ‘is there another way we can do that instead?’ … It’s always somehow challenging. Either professionally, or also collegially, because now you just have to poke at that person. Insanely many things can be challenging, right? … And that’s the thing with agile, it takes a lot. … if one is … living by the spirit it implies … then one must dare to talk to people, and sit next to them and get involved.” (Julia L., project manager)

The self-narrative about being (more) honest (than others) requires not only specific competencies, but also an organizational culture where transparency is directed at both the product development and what staff and clients must learn to engage in these new types of relationships. This becomes clear when one approaches agility as empirically validated software development methods and practices that utilize iterative and incremental development methods (Rubin, 2013), and as an organizational capability to learn, explore, and exploit knowledge (Moe et al., 2010). As a consequence, it creates new insecurities generated by a customer’s possible difficulty in committing to the required responsibility of setting priorities.
for smaller chunks of the project, and by staff members’ difficulty switching from the role of
technical expert to facilitator at sprint meetings. How these new dynamics affect work
commitment is rather complex precisely because the social competencies related to agile
approaches to project management are complex, thus changing power relationships and mutual
expectations among colleagues and external clients. Greater insecurity about one’s own
professional abilities may affect continuance commitment. Such insecurity also affects
employees’ understanding of themselves, their collegial relationships, and hence their social
identity.

*Summing up the Dialectics of Honesty*

Being honest boosts one’s self-esteem and external relationships, thus enabling one to position
oneself counter to the mainstream (a deceiving) sales culture. Simultaneously, employees must
be prepared to present risk assessments and pilots at ultra-short intervals, a requirement that
can intensify work during sprints rather than just at the end of a project, thus compressing time
in a manner that demands constant efficiency. As shown, this heightens professional insecurity,
for which reason continuance commitment may fall, as employees may question whether they
want to submit to this type of pressure. Agile approaches to project management are expected
to deliver a high level of transparency and honesty, but the logics of action in the agile mindset
affect the temporality in ways that naturally expose employee work process imperfections.
From a professional standpoint, this may reduce employees’ normative commitment and
intensify their work, as they must more frequently engage with colleagues and customers who
approach responsibility in a different manner. For a project manager the potential lies in
enrolling customers in sharing project development responsibility, as decision-making
processes are transparent and continuously taken on board. The aim of preventing professional
insecurity necessitates room for reflection and knowledge sharing in secure spaces, where
failure is not detrimental to the relationships with customers.

**Flat Hierarchy**

*New Affiliations Created Through Equality*

Despite having a traditional overall hierarchical structure, an agile approach to project
management aims at a flat team-based hierarchy in relation to both client partnerships and
autonomous equality within the team. This agile aim, sometimes termed “servant leadership,”
is intended to put the initiative in the team’s hands. The project manager becomes a facilitator rather than a director. While the IT consultancy was focused on its own organizational change, what this flat hierarchy actually entailed was gradually and continually negotiated. For example, the company’s mission was seen as something to be collectively negotiated and not managerially defined, although decisions reminiscent of traditional CEO hierarchies also occurred, even at the project level. Crocitto and Youssef (2003) explain that the agile organization changes the traditional demarcation between managers and employees among functional areas of specialization. Likewise, the partner in the following excerpt explains how new decision-making processes and a new understanding of collegial collaboration are required to define the company mission and make transparent decisions:

“We wanted to facilitate a process where we take rounds and everyone is allowed to say something, and everyone is listened to. Just very practical tools that make it much easier to be equal, to use that word instead of ‘self-management.’ I would introduce new ways of making decisions [in our agile transformation process] where we could test different formats, and we already started some of those things, where you have all parties involved, where you document your decisions so that what’s going on in the organization is transparent.” (John P., partner, project manager)

Equality is phrased as an important social dynamic in agile approaches to project management and contrasted to “self-management” in order to stress the importance of working toward collective decision-making. A meeting practice where each employee participates in “rounds” and has “permission to say things” that facilitate “being listened to” can create a commitment to the organizational purpose. This inclusive and democratic understanding of agile approaches to project management produces other types of social relationships among individual employees—relationships not necessarily restricted to functional responsibilities or mere teamwork, but that also enforce relationships connected to how each employee is dynamically involved in decisions throughout the company. Crocitto and Youssef (2003) also support this point, suggesting that movements across organizational (and functional) borders magnify the importance of networking to employees. This may affect how the perception of continuance commitment is maintained, since how employees orient their commitment can be bound either
to their functional role or to a project management role centered on networking with different stakeholders.

Although this excerpt is also an idealized vision of change, ethnographic observations support this inclusive and democratic approach to creating greater equality in decision-making processes, because it depicts a range of collective and social events and invites family-like informal relationships into the communication and physical setup of the workspace. An inclusive culture and democratic atmosphere appear to be in the company’s DNA, reinforced by a strong narrative about the importance of honesty and mutual respect. Most employees say they chose to work for this company for this precise reason. In this sense, the flat hierarchy closely interrelates with the values of working with honest and whole people. These values of inclusiveness, honesty, and respect reinforce each other as employees are invited to participate on equal terms—not as a junior consultant or a manager, but as a whole person.

*Enactment of Paralysis*

As already discussed, the normative ideals of agility can be difficult to incorporate into the organization’s daily practices. The inclusive and seemingly honest culture and strong collective work identity were not straightforwardly transferred to the daily hassles of the more instrumental agile practices used. They might have been less transferable to the organization’s (more complex) daily practices.

“We’ve said something along the lines of: ‘Those agile principles, couldn’t we somehow transfer them to the whole organization?’ … In the whole organization, there are many more unknowns and more grey zones, and much more ‘Who has a say?’ and ‘How do we decide things?’ and that’s what we’re doing now, and this is where I experience some feuds, because we’ve set the stage for how to implement it. How much structure versus freedom? How to find a good balance?” (Soren P., CEO)

In the excerpt above, Soren P. describes some of the difficulties with incorporating agility into decision-making processes. As he sees it, creating the right frames for such processes requires balancing structure, that is, control and freedom—a balancing act that, from a human behavior perspective, touches on the quintessence of paradoxes in organizations.

One danger of a consensus-driven culture is the risk of paralysis. In agile approaches to project management, inclusion and collectivity are ensured through the normative commitment of
letting involved stakeholders have a say. When no formal hierarchy exists and the culture is consensus-based, paralysis rather than performative action and innovation may occur. When asked about who should make decisions, Eric answers:

“No, but [the CEO] would say: ‘It affects everyone else too, so maybe this is something we should just talk about,’ and it probably also recurs that we’re somewhat of a consensus culture, which is not always so healthy, I think. In some ways it’s the flipside of the coin that we respect each other, and for me there’s also a connection to our always wanting to do the right thing. This means that we sometimes go into an analysis-paralysis. So, ‘can we know more about this before we make a decision?’ We practice just saying ’we do it,’ and then see what the consequences are.” (Eric L., developer)

From an employee perspective, such inertia or paralysis creates frustration and insecurity and risks challenging commitment. If the management or partners fail to clarify how to practice hierarchy at the team and organizational levels, how can the employee identify with it and thus commit to the workplace?

Interviewer: “What could push you to move on?”

Julia L.: “[sighs] Most of all … if I don't feel there’s a clear direction … For the whole company. … So, if I lose confidence in the partner group, for example, in being able to figure out what they agree on. … Well, I think it's problematic that everything is up for discussion all the time. Nothing ever gets closed.”

This employee is concerned with the company’s mission and vision, and continuance commitment is central to her. Her work commitment decreases when the board fails to communicate how agility affects the mission and how this should be translated into flat hierarchical practices, a development that might lead her to seek another job. Clarity in a company’s mission and vision are closely related to its social identity and may subsequently affect talent retention. A vague mission and constant questioning may blur employees’ sense of right and wrong (normative commitment) and may also challenge their sense of belonging and hence their affective commitment.

Summing up the Dialectics of Hierarchy

Moscovici (1979) and Howarth (2002) have both underlined power relationships as pivotal to the continuous creation of any social identity that is also core to affective commitment. In this case, seniority and experience proved to be capacities distorting employees’ otherwise
seemingly equal participation. This finding reflects that previous research on the shadowy sides of anti-hierarchical organizations (Diefenbach & Sillince 2011) do not negate the fact that informal power relationships apparently play an important role, despite the aim of establishing more transparency, also showing how the projectification of agile work can undermine collegiality, mutual adjustment, and rational democracy (Hodgson & Briand, 2013) and put project management at stake.

**Autonomy**

*Taking Initiative to Get Ideas Tested by Experienced Colleagues*

Another key feature of working agilely is to be autonomous and responsible while also participating in the organization’s continuous and rapid development. In the simplest sense, autonomy concerns a person’s ability to act on their own values and interests. In a positive light autonomy has an emancipatory potential in agility, moving employees beyond hierarchical control toward empowering and fulfilling work (Peters, 1992; Roy & Audet, 2003). An ability to take initiative is key to such aims:

> “Usually [reactions to individual initiatives] are positive, because people think it’s exciting, and we like to talk about what we can improve. If someone strives to investigate or clarify [a new idea], then it’s usually well received. … sometimes you forget some angles, if you just do it yourself. So, I've got used to testing my ideas with the CEO or a developer, depending on who can give me insight. (Eric L., project manager)

Agile approaches to project management encourage individual autonomy, especially when individual initiatives are tested among the colleagues and stakeholders directly involved. Autonomy can be defined as the ability to make work-method and procedural decisions that foster creativity and innovativeness (Malik et al., 2021). The personal motivation of permission to experiment at will interconnects with the invitation to “test my ideas” with experts that can give “insight,” which means that the interaction between autonomous employees and experts is being practiced. Lappi et al. (2018) support the call for agile approaches to project management to heed the differences between high- and low-skilled team members. Batra (2009) addresses tensions between such members. Tessem (2014) notes the role of experienced developers as more active decision makers. Berger and Beynon-Davies (2009) discuss the varying degrees of competency. Drury-Grogan (2014) argues the need for agile members to discuss their
capabilities and skills openly and honestly and thus to delegate tasks within the team wisely. Bjarnason et al. (2012) and Jørgensen (2016) highlight the importance of stakeholders’ and customers’ competencies and capabilities, which should include a combination of business and technical skills. These new types of professional collaborations accord with Whitworth and Biddle (2007), who suggest that agile approaches explicitly integrate behavioral and social concerns into software development methodologies and promote a collective culture as well as an affective work commitment comprising a complex set of values, principles, and practices. They declared whole team social interaction as essential for fostering the motivation, involvement, and cohesiveness associated with agile teams. This oscillation between autonomy requirements interrelated with the social dynamics of more experienced staff members, although these requirements also generated complex and sometimes difficult social dynamics.

Autonomy is Earned Through Experience

People often assume that introducing agile techniques and approaches will foster a company’s transparency as regards the effectiveness of its collaboration process and the delegation of authority to autonomous colleagues. However, in the muddy reality the relational dynamics are complex, and experience automatically becomes associated with status, as this excerpt expresses:

Interviewer: “Is there any connection between what you call … professional status or professional experience-based status and then the opportunity to exert influence?”

Sara P., partner, project manager: “Yes, because typically you have several angles to your ideas. Someone without much experience comes up with an idea that is quickly dismantled. And that can be tough. But it won’t be dismantled in a personal way. It’s dismantled on the basis of a real professional argument: ‘Well, you can't do that, because you have to think about …’ There’s an angle that you haven’t thought of. In that way, I guess, it might be a little hard on the young or inexperienced to come up with ideas, because those old tough colleagues just say ‘no,’ not because ‘it’s not at all agile or it’s not the way we work.’ No, the argument is based on an explanation. We’ve always talked about the fact that starting here is difficult. Both because we’ve been really bad at recognizing when things went well—only good to express when something wasn’t good enough. And it's a bunch of talented people. And everyone has reported that it has been a little anxiety-provoking to start here, and people haven’t quite known if they were doing okay, and they were dead nervous if [the CEO] Soren P. wanted to talk with them because
‘now it's over!’… And we’ve also been famous for saying 'no thanks’ to people who weren’t good enough after a trial period.”

One is not to take skepticism about ideas “personally,” their being “dismantled on the basis of a real professional argument.” The admitted “roughness” on the “young or inexperienced” also makes the company “famous” for its excellence. Seniority and experience within the organization are asserted as legitimizing the authority to have a professional say and decision mandate, but what defines such an argument is unclear. This excerpt illustrates how every staff member must perform well and how non-performing employees are often fired during the trial period. Although the same excerpt also states that “recognizing when things went well” has been harder than identifying shortfalls, this expectation of high performance may also contradict the inclusive narrative prevailing in the organization. Sara P. appears to be describing a culture where senior (experienced) employees define, and should define, what constitutes competency and relevant arguments as well as what the standards for these are. Thus, senior, experienced employees define the mandate to make decisions or even to offer legitimate suggestions.

This is manifestly experienced at a general level (within project management or programming, for example) but also linked to the organization’s local corporate culture, as experience is linked with how things are done in this particular company. A newcomer, no matter their formal competencies and former experience, will therefore have to learn the organization’s informal hierarchies and cultural practices before being included and accepted. This informal trial period is coupled with a cooperative culture focused on high performance in a way that may cause insecurity and self-doubt, thus challenging affective as well as continuance commitment.

**Summing up the Dialectics of Autonomy**

As for elitism and fear of failure, several narratives point to how colleagues are reluctant or even afraid to participate because they feel inadequate or senior staff reprimand them. Similarly, the narrative of the inclusive community may also enact a marginalization process, whereby high-performing, autonomous individuals (with the right “professional” arguments) are supported and included in the solidarity of the company, while the “just good enough” or simply inexperienced are overlooked or even fired. As such, “having a say” is not baked into formal procedures and hierarchies but experienced as a personal matter because, in principle, everybody has an equal voice. Relating work commitment and project management to these
tensions, points to several strategies. Clegg et al. (2002) suggest that most paradoxes are related and that managers in general are confronted with dilemmas. In the case of the paradox between an intimate and inclusive versus an elitist and performance, individualized culture, project managers would have to suggest choosing between the two poles. They would also have to seek to establish more consistent work conditions and project management tools ensuring the inclusion of newcomers, and to scrutinize how critical reflection can support these tools. However, many organization scholars suggest that choosing one pole of the paradox is “too” normative, because it suggests one right way to manage. In light of this, we stress that the choice of one pole should be related to the choice of project management approach, and thus take into account the human dimension, which is naturally contextually determined. “Making that choice (of choosing one pole of the paradox ed.) may, in time, lead one to disregard the forfeited options, which can come back with a vengeance when the environment changes and current routines are no longer useful in dealing with the challenges that the organization faces.” (Clegg et al. 2002, p. 487). When it comes to work commitment, what may seem a paradoxical tension to the organization may appear different from the perspective of work commitment or of the employee.

**Discussion**

This article has explored agile approaches to project management through work commitment processes. The agile mindset and culture were identified through narratives focusing on working as whole people, honesty, hierarchy, and autonomy. We have discussed how these experiences help develop and maintain a social identity that influences the sense of commitment within the organization. Identifying with values as expressed in the *Agile Manifesto* and enacting them in the business case proved key to employee commitment in both a negative and positive sense.

Several dialectics have proven necessary to consider when one focuses on the human dimension of project management. First, the inclusive culture that supports the approach to staff members as *whole people* enables and enforces an affective and continuance work commitment—a strong sense of belonging and desire to stay in the company. However, as shown, the positive dimensions of this inclusive culture may be challenged by several of its pitfalls and conditions: growth and size plus elitism and fear of failure. Second, on the theme of honesty, this study
adds to critiques about the shadowy sides of total openness, addressing how working with a high demand of transparency through prototypes and frequent sprints can also make one vulnerable to personal exposure and professional insecurity. Third, the social dynamics around the agile ambition of flat hierarchy do not negate the fact that soft power and informal power relationships apparently play an important role, despite the aim of establishing a more empowering alternative. Fourth, in terms of autonomy, the employees’ strong sense of community and their expressions regarding inclusion or a fear of exclusion have positive and negative dimensions. These aspects arouse a strong sense of positive belonging and normative commitment, but also anxiety and insecurity about performance ability, which potentially lower self-esteem.

Conclusion

We set out to explore how the dialectics of agility impact affective, normative, and continuance work commitments in a business case. During this process we examined work commitment issues among employees, identifying key features that enable agile approaches to project management. From a process perspective on project management, Niederman et al. (2018) point out that agile practices have many flavors of specified processes and that one must understand how social dynamics, individual characteristics, and work styles affect these practices. This article sought to clarify some of these social dynamics by examining how the organizational culture of the case company intermingles with the project management strategies, and how the narratives of working in agile ways affect employees’ sense of belonging and commitment to the organization.

Limitations

The study has a few limitations, which we address as follows. Methodologically, the particularity of this case may play out differently in bigger companies, whose agile approaches to project management procedures may be more standardized and thus less hybrid and likely to have other social dynamics. We cannot know whether a higher standard level creates less conflictual dialectics. In addition, modern liberal societies generally promote individuality and a masculine culture of competition and performance. This is particularly prevalent in startups (Williams et al., 2020). Although the case company also embraces hominess and intimacy in its culture, a comparison with how OC is experienced in a more antihierarchical company, such as a cooperative, could be interesting. Theoretically, our use of paradox theory contributes to
the field of research by stressing the problems of using agile approaches to project management too simplistically. At the same time, however, perpetual complexity is fundamental to all social life. While fully aware of this, we maintain that our study contributes important insights thus far unaddressed in the research on agile approaches to project management.

**Implications for Practice**
To help avoid the pitfalls of accommodating project management, we have also identified some problematic and critical aspects of agile practices. Overall, we emphasize how agile approaches to project management enable innovation and reduce bottlenecks, as well as offer a framework that gives many employees an overall sense of work commitment, because a culture of honesty and transparency supports both the close community and gives employees a sense of professional expertise in their company’s services and products. Still, agility has some downsides. When employees go to work, not only in their capacity as a professional but also with their entire identity, that is, their whole self, more parts of themselves will be exposed at work. As Grey (2012) critically indicates, the downside in terms of human resources may be that a managerial approach to employees as being (and having to be) fully committed to their work leaves them with even less reconstitution time, privacy, and general life outside work. If an agile project manager and their organization are not completely in sync with, for example, decision-making mandates, feedback processes, and the actual delegating of responsibility to customers, a feeling of insecurity as well as incompetence can arise and thus compromise well-being and commitment. Moreover, managing with an expectation of strong autonomy and self-management potentially supports a culture of excellence, thus allowing little room for mistakes. Indeed, supporting honesty and transparency while also placing the person at the center is somewhat paradoxical.

Although the insecurity of how to belong and be accepted is presented as a consequence of informal and unclear decision-making procedures, we suggest that agile approaches to project management depend on strong in-group solidarity and commitment. This success criterion is based on the necessity of maintaining employees’ affective and continuance commitments. Without solidarity and the meaningfulness of a greater purpose, employees today will gradually lose their commitment, working only in keeping with the institutional commitment and ultimately becoming more eager to shift jobs. The strong internal corporate identification with the corporate culture and the maintenance of employees’ social identity can be seen as a buffer
against a hard individualism, where individual performativity and marketability erode human solidarity and well-being.

Our analysis also exposed occasional discord where the organizational and project levels of agility intersect, which returns us to the point of hybridity presented in the case description. When organizations imply a culture of agile approaches to project management on one level, but are not yet there organizationally, a dynamic of confusion may emerge and subsequently decrease commitment. This involves an organizational paralysis that frustrates workers. Not having a clear organizational mission might also challenge work commitment overall (Niederman et al., 2018). Moreover, decision-making paralysis invites power struggles along more traditional stratification lines, as exemplified in anxious workers afraid of not living up to the quality demanded in the workplace. Cregg et al. (2002) succinctly argue that “two poles of a paradox may operate at different levels in the organization. A given dynamic may be true of individual behaviour but the opposite may apply at the organizational level. Again, there is not much to say about how managers can handle this type of tension other than recognize and prepare for it (p. 484).”

What are the alternatives if digitalization and new organization practices laud the autonomous entrepreneurial employee but erode positive social identity and solidarity? Are agile approaches to project management in fact less hierarchical, less bureaucratic, and more attuned to human and environmental needs (Hodgson & Briand, 2013)? The answer would be “yes” from one viewpoint, as inclusiveness and participation are indeed explicit aims. On the other hand, several points of criticism can be raised in relation to translating core agility values into practice. The pledge to work with constant dynamic (unfinished) adaptations results in a wide open, potentially vulnerable exposure of oneself, one’s colleagues, and customers. In constant dialogue with the ever-changing demands of the outside world, employees in agile organizations must be adaptable and flexible and dare to share one’s professional vulnerability and uncertainty with both colleagues and customers. Agility sets employees free, but does it also uncover new vulnerabilities? When does an autonomous and self-directed employee know they have done it “well enough”? In other words, how can agile organization head toward a showdown with zero-fault culture?
This brings us back to our questioning of “people as our most important asset.” Grey (2012) maintains that a human relations approach in management is not necessarily more humane than Taylorism, because the notion of getting closer to people is also more intrusive. Managing “people over software” is more demanding emotionally and exposes professional insecurities. However, this critique is not one-sided, as human consideration, freedom, creativity, and self-management are also topics of discourse. Project managers must be aware that emotional exposure and freedom also make employees insecure and vulnerable. Furthermore, who are “the people?” And what is meant by “asset?” An interest in human needs may be not for a human cause but for maximizing profit. Ultimately, one might therefore provocatively say that “people” are customers and “asset” is a useful or valuable thing, person, or an item of property. As such, an important tension arises between the humanistic approach of agility and an even stronger instrumentalization of people. Agile management is still conceived of as a means of generating profit. Considering people to be more valuable sounds good, but valuable to whom and at what human cost?

Overall, the tensions between the positive and negative dynamics of agility shown in this study indicate a potential for taking a more dialectic than sequential approach to project management, one that can likely be generalized to other agile contexts. Such a dialectic approach has practical implications for individuals (executives and employees) in agile contexts.

**Implications for Research and Theory**

By focusing on human behavior and work commitment in research on the agile approaches to project management, we have accentuated social dynamics, which should be more sensitive to how political, institutional and, not least, social contexts influence dynamics of contradictions (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017). The study clearly shows that contradictions are central to the interplay between organizational changes and human behavior, and that they should be acknowledged in project management research and theory as an important aspect of organizational change. As such, these insights can be applied by recognizing that, whether paradoxes are to be resolved, resisted, or accepted, human behavior should be taken into account not only as a matter of enhancing work commitment, but also as an acknowledgment that the shadowy sides of paradoxes are not necessarily gone. We thus maintain a dialectical approach in instances where research and theorizing on agile project management can and should be not only situationally dependent but also deeply social.
**Future Research**

Whether some specific forms of tensions are more prevalent in some types of hybrid organizations than others, therefore affecting project management, should be further investigated. We invite further critical research on organizational behavior so that a vocabulary for understanding these dynamics can be developed. We also suggest that researchers be aware of whether they are investigating solely tools or also a cultural mindset in their research on agile approaches to project management, as the cultural mindset brings with it new social dynamics that affect work commitment in different ways. As such, more research could be focused on how social dynamics influence the conceptualization of work commitment and the importance of such dynamics in project management.

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