Agile vs waterfall vs hybrid: how to choose a delivery approach

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Agile and waterfall are often argued about as if one were right. They are tools for different amounts of uncertainty. Most real organisations end up with a hybrid, and the useful skill is knowing which parts of a project need which approach.

TL;DR The short version

- Agile and waterfall are tools for different levels of uncertainty, not rival truths.
- Waterfall plans in detail up front and controls change; agile plans only the next iteration and expects change.
- Most organisations run a hybrid, so choose per part of the project by how certain the requirements are and how costly change is.

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Waterfall in brief

Work moves through phases in order: requirements, design, build, test, release. Each phase finishes before the next starts. It suits work where requirements are stable and well understood, where change is expensive, or where a regulator expects documented phase gates.

Agile in brief

Work is delivered in short iterations, each producing something usable. Plans are revisited often based on feedback. It suits work where requirements are uncertain and change is cheap, which describes most software. See Scrum events explained.

Side by side

- **Planning:** waterfall plans in detail up front; agile plans in detail only for the next iteration.
- **Change:** waterfall controls it formally; agile expects it.
- **Feedback:** waterfall gets it late; agile gets it every iteration.
- **Documentation:** waterfall relies on it between phases; agile keeps what helps the team.
- **Risk:** waterfall risks building the wrong thing; agile risks losing the big picture.

Hybrid approaches

- Fixed milestones and budget at the programme level, agile iterations inside each team.

- Up-front design for hard-to-change parts, such as hardware, data models and contracts, and iteration for the rest.
- Phase gates for compliance sign-off, with continuous delivery between them.

How to choose

- How certain are the requirements?
- How expensive is it to change something already built?
- How quickly can you get real user feedback?
- What does your contract or regulator require?
- Choose per workstream, not per company. A firmware team and a web team in the same programme may need different answers.

> Related credential: Agile Delivery Practitioner. Explore the exam facts and syllabus.

Sources and further reading

1. IICTP. TPBOK, Engineering Governance & Agile Delivery. iictp.org/standards/tpbok.

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