Module 2. Execution in action: delivering the roadmap through development work

BARÇA INNOVATION HUB
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Introduction

In the digital era, every sports organization, media company, and global brand understands the need for a bold digital vision. But what separates the digital leaders from the laggards is not the vision itself, it's the ability to execute it effectively.

Many organizations spend months, sometimes years, defining digital transformation roadmaps. These documents are full of ambition: fan-first engagement strategies, data monetization plans, platform launches. However, translating these ideas into working systems, functioning processes, and tangible business value is where the real challenge lies. As research by McKinsey and Company (2020) shows, **over 70% of digital transformations fail**, often due to breakdowns in execution, not strategy.

Execution is not simply the "doing" phase after planning, it is a continuous, adaptive process of discovery, iteration, learning, and value

creation. Traditional waterfall models, which follow a rigid step-by-step path, often fall short in today's environment where customer needs, technologies, and platforms evolve at lightning speed. This is why agile and iterative development approaches have become the default for leading digital organizations worldwide (Beck et al., 2001).

Importantly, execution needs to be customer-centric. Whether the end-user is a fan, athlete, coach, sponsor, or internal team, agile methods ensure delivery teams are constantly validating what works and adjusting course based on real-world feedback. This shift from output-focused delivery to outcome-focused learning is at the heart of effective digital execution.

This reading will explore the **core principles and frameworks** of agile execution, using **examples from outside the sports industry** to show how leading organizations build and scale digital capabilities. In the next reading, we will examine how these same models are now being applied successfully within the sports ecosystem.

CONTINUE

1. The execution gap in digital transformation

Introduction

Many organizations begin their digital transformation journey with an inspiring vision. Strategy decks are filled with compelling terms: “hyper-personalized customer experience”, “data-driven decision-making”, “platform business models”. But when it comes to delivering those visions, teams quickly find themselves stuck. The execution gap (the disconnect between planning and delivery) is one of the most common causes of digital stagnation.

According to research from KPMG (2022), only 19% of companies surveyed reported that their digital strategies are fully implemented at scale. Most are either in pilot stages or have yet to move beyond initial experiments. Why is execution so difficult?

Common execution barriers

Digital execution often stumbles due to five recurring issues.

1. **Overly rigid planning frameworks**: traditional project management models such as waterfall planning assume a linear world. In digital, where requirements evolve with market feedback, this rigidity quickly breaks down.
2. **Departmental silos**: a digital roadmap might call for a seamless customer experience, but IT, marketing, and operations still work in isolation. This lack of cross-functional alignment derails progress.
3. **Lack of iterative feedback loops**: without mechanisms to test, learn, and adapt quickly, teams build digital solutions that are misaligned with user needs.
4. **Under-resourced development capabilities**: organizations often underestimate the internal tech and data capacity required to deliver or over-rely on external vendors with unclear accountability.
5. **Unclear ownership of delivery**: if there is no product owner or team accountable for specific deliverables, milestones fall through the cracks.

Waterfall failures: a cautionary tale

A classic example is seen in the U.S. government's launch of the HealthCare.gov platform in 2013. Despite years of planning and over $300 million in investment, the website crashed upon launch and failed to deliver core services

to users. An internal review later revealed that the project followed a traditional waterfall approach with no working software tested until the end — a fatal flaw in a complex, citizen-facing digital service (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2014).

By contrast, private-sector leaders have shifted toward **agile**, **iterative**, and **cross-functional**

models of execution.

Execution as a capability, not a phase

Forward-thinking companies now treat digital execution as a **capability to be built**, not a phase to be completed. ING Bank, for example, underwent a large-scale agile transformation in which over 350 teams were reorganized into small, autonomous squads, each focused on delivering value within a sprint-based structure (ING Group, 2018). The result? Faster delivery cycles, more resilient architecture, and tighter alignment between business and technology.

This reframing, from viewing execution as a hand-off process to seeing it as an **embedded, continuous discipline,** is key to sustainable digital transformation.

CONTINUE

2. Key concepts in agile and iterative development

Introduction

Agile is no longer just a methodology for software developers, it's a mindset and operating model increasingly adopted across industries to drive digital change. For sports organizations navigating dynamic fan behavior, technology disruption, and the need for speed, the principles of agile execution offer a practical, proven alternative to traditional project delivery.

Companies in financial services, healthcare, retail, and manufacturing have widely adopted agile approaches to stay responsive and innovative. These examples offer critical insight for the sports industry as it builds digital maturity.

Agile principles in business context

The Agile Manifesto, first published in 2001, outlines four core values: individuals and interactions over processes and tools; working software over

comprehensive documentation; customer collaboration over contract negotiation; and responding to change over following a plan (Beck et al., 2001). When applied beyond software, these principles support an environment where:

- **cross-functional teams** collaborate continuously,
- **customer feedback** drives prioritization,
- **work is released in increments**, not at the end of a long cycle,
- **failure is embraced** as a learning mechanism.

This approach contrasts sharply with traditional waterfall models that front-load planning and delay value delivery.

Sprints: delivering value in short cycles

A sprint is a short, time-boxed period (typically 1 to 3 weeks) where a team works on a defined set of tasks. Sprints offer predictable delivery cadence and create opportunities to review, learn, and adjust quickly.

For example, Spotify organizes its teams into “squads” that operate like mini-startups, each delivering features or services independently within their own

sprint rhythm. This model helps Spotify push product updates faster than many of its competitors (Kniberg and Ivarsson, 2012).

Product ownership and the role of the backlog

The product owner is responsible for defining the team's priorities through a **backlog,** a dynamic, prioritized list of features, improvements, and technical tasks. The backlog evolves based on customer input, business priorities, and emerging insights.

In agile organizations, product owners serve as bridges between business strategy and development execution, ensuring that what is built aligns with what creates value.

Epics, stories, and incremental development

Agile work is often broken down into the following.

- **Epics**: large, strategic themes or capabilities (e.g. "build mobile app").
- **User stories**: specific user-focused functionalities (e.g. "as a fan, I want to see live match stats on the app").
- **Tasks**: actionable steps to deliver those stories.

This layered structure supports planning at different levels of granularity and helps teams visualize progress through tools like Jira, Trello, or Azure DevOps.

Agile vs. waterfall: a comparison table

Table 1. Comparison between agile and waterfall

Feature	Waterfall	Agile
Planning	Upfront, rigid	Iterative, adaptive
Delivery model	Big release at the end	Continuous delivery
Change response	Difficult, expensive	Embedded into process
Customer involvement	Occasional (start/end)	Ongoing, collaborative
Feedback cycles	Infrequent	Regular (every sprint)

Source: own elaboration.

Scaling agile: from teams to organizations

As organizations mature, they often scale agile using frameworks like **SAFe (scaled agile framework)**, **LeSS (large-scale scrum)**, or **Spotify's tribe model**. These models help coordinate across multiple teams while maintaining autonomy and speed.

For instance, in the retail sector, Target adopted a scaled agile model across its digital and supply chain teams to accelerate e-commerce delivery. Within two years, it was deploying hundreds of digital improvements each month, many originating from internal product squads (Target Corporation, 2020).

CONTINUE

3. Building the right teams and capabilities for execution

Introduction

Agile transformation is not just about new rituals like sprints or backlogs, it's about how people work together. At the heart of digital execution are **cross-functional teams** that bring together diverse skills (from data to development, design to marketing), all focused on delivering user value in small, continuous increments.

In industries from telecom to banking, successful digital change has been driven by empowered teams that own both development and outcomes. For sports organizations, adopting these structures starts with understanding what works across sectors.

The core agile team structure

A typical agile team is made up of the following members.

- **Product owner**: owns the backlog and represents the voice of the customer or business.
- **Scrum master or agile coach**: facilitates the process, removes blockers, and supports team improvement.
- **Developers/engineers**: build and deliver the features.
- **Designers/UX specialists**: ensure usability, aesthetics, and alignment with customer needs.
- **Data analysts**: provide insights for decision-making and iteration.

This team may also include QA (quality assurance), DevOps, or content specialists depending on the scope of the project.

The role of a data engineer or scientist in agile teams

Modern agile teams increasingly include **data specialists** who go beyond reporting to drive architecture and intelligence. Whether labeled as data engineers, analytics leads, or machine learning specialists, their role is to:

- connect to and model data from customer platforms (like CRMs or CDPs),
- build pipelines that transform raw data into decision-ready insights,

- collaborate with marketers, strategists, or designers to test and optimize fan journeys, offers, or experiences.

In industries like e-commerce or healthcare, data engineers work side by side with product managers to embed experimentation, A/B testing, and predictive analytics into sprint delivery (McKinsey and Company, 2022).

Empowered teams and psychological safety

High-performing agile teams are built on **trust and empowerment**. Members are encouraged to take ownership of tasks, raise issues early, and propose new ideas without fear of failure.

Google's Project Aristotle found that **psychological safety** (the ability to speak up without fear of embarrassment or punishment) was the top factor in effective teams (Google, 2015).

Companies like Atlassian and Adobe support this through decentralized decision-making and feedback loops that let teams adjust how they work.

Collaboration with stakeholders

While agile teams are autonomous, they do not operate in isolation. Collaboration with business owners, end-users, and leadership is ongoing and built into agile events like:

- **Sprint planning**: align on goals and capacity.
- **Sprint review**: showcase results and gather feedback.
- **Sprint retrospective**: reflect on process and improvements.

Clear roles and consistent feedback cycles build alignment without reverting to command-and-control dynamics.

Talent development and role evolution

As agile becomes the norm, organizations often need to reskill and evolve roles. For example:

- **Project managers** transition into scrum masters or agile delivery leads.
- **Data/reporting analysts** grow into data product owners.
- **Marketing strategists** learn to work in agile pods focused on customer segments.

Professional services companies like Accenture and Deloitte have created internal “agile academies” to accelerate this learning process (Accenture, 2021).

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4. Execution rhythms: planning, review and adaptation

Introduction

A key strength of agile and iterative development is not just *what* gets built but *how frequently and adaptively* progress is made. In traditional planning models, large-scale updates are delivered in long intervals. In contrast, agile execution breaks delivery into short, time-boxed cycles with constant feedback, improvement, and learning.

These recurring cycles of planning, doing, reviewing, and adapting are often called **execution rhythms**. In industries like finance, retail, and SaaS (software-as-a-service), they allow teams to stay aligned, responsive to users, and transparent to leadership.

Sprint cycles: the core operating rhythm

At the heart of agile delivery is the **sprint,** typically 1–3 weeks long, where the team commits to a defined set of tasks from the product backlog and aims to complete them.

Each sprint includes the following.

- **Sprint planning**: sets the sprint goal and selects work items.
- **Daily stand-ups**: 15-minute team check-ins to surface blockers and coordinate.
- **Sprint review**: presentation of completed work to stakeholders.
- **Sprint retrospective**: internal team reflection and process improvement.

These rituals help maintain cadence, alignment, and ownership without the overhead of excessive reporting or meetings.

In a global banking transformation led by ING, squads of 8–10 people ran two-week sprints, coordinated by tribe leads who aligned across squads and business areas. This allowed faster release cycles and increased employee satisfaction (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

Release planning and incremental delivery

Not every feature or milestone fits into a single sprint. Agile organizations often use **release planning** to map which features or deliverables are expected in upcoming months. This helps business units, operations, and marketing prepare for rollouts.

Unlike traditional product launches, agile teams **release value incrementally**. For instance, a new mobile feature might be released to 5% of users for testing before scaling further (a common technique in e-commerce, app development, and SaaS platforms like Spotify or Shopify).

Feedback loops and continuous improvement

Execution rhythms are only valuable if they lead to better results. That's why **continuous feedback** is critical, from both users and team members. This includes:

- **user feedback** from usability testing, surveys, or analytics tools,
- **stakeholder input** gathered during sprint reviews,
- **team input** during retrospectives to improve velocity and quality.

Companies like Atlassian publish internal team velocity dashboards and use Net Promoter Scores (NPS) not just for customers, but for employees working in

agile pods (Atlassian, 2023).

Aligning teams on a shared cadence

Large organizations may have dozens of teams working in parallel. To keep execution synchronized, many adopt a **scaled agile approach** (such as the SAFe framework) where shared ceremonies and quarterly planning cycles ensure cross-team coordination.

Even without full frameworks, aligning sprint calendars, shared sprint reviews, and joint retrospectives can foster cohesion and system-wide clarity.

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5. Leadership and organizational structures supporting agile delivery

Introduction

Agile delivery requires a reimagining of leadership roles and responsibilities. Traditional command-and-control structures often stifle responsiveness and innovation, whereas agile environments rely on **empowered, cross-functional teams** supported by leaders who act as **coaches, facilitators, and enablers** rather than top-down decision-makers (McKinsey and Company, 2020). This shift demands both a mindset transformation and changes to formal organizational architecture.

Agile-aligned organizations flatten hierarchies and increase autonomy. Decision-making authority is distributed to teams, which are trusted to manage their own work and solve problems in real time. Leaders in agile settings focus on **removing obstacles**, aligning goals, and fostering a culture of continuous learning, rather than micromanaging execution (Beck et al., 2001). This dynamic boosts both speed and employee engagement.

New roles to support agile practices

To enable agile delivery, many companies have introduced new roles or redefined existing ones. The most common ones are described below.

- **Product owner**: acts as the voice of the customer and ensures that each sprint delivers business value. Responsible for managing the backlog and setting priorities based on evolving stakeholder needs.
- **Scrum master or agile coach**: helps teams adopt agile principles and removes blockers to progress. Functions more as a servant leader than a traditional project manager.
- **Chapter leads or functional mentors**: in organizations that adopt a **matrix or squad-based model**, chapter leads ensure discipline-specific growth and coherence across different squads or teams.

For example, Spotify's agile model includes **tribes, squads, chapters, and guilds,** creating a highly adaptive network structure (Spotify Engineering Culture, 2014). This has influenced tech companies and corporations globally, many of which now follow similar models.

Governance in agile organizations

One of the key challenges in scaling agile beyond isolated teams is ensuring coherence and direction across the organization. Agile governance does not mean abandoning strategy; rather, it ensures strategy is executed in a flexible, iterative manner. This is often supported by the following.

- **Agile portfolio management**: a process where investment decisions are regularly reviewed based on evolving priorities and business value delivery.
- **Quarterly business reviews (QBRs)**: time-boxed alignment rituals to reassess strategic objectives and adapt roadmaps.
- **Value streams**: organizing work around customer journeys or product lines rather than siloed departments, ensuring value delivery at every step (SAFe, 2021).

Organizations such as **ING Bank**, **Philips**, and **LEGO Group** have publicly documented their agile transformations at scale, all of them emphasize leadership transformation and new models of governance as prerequisites for sustainable agile adoption (McKinsey and Company, 2021).

Summary table: leadership shift in agile delivery

Table 2. Leadership shift in agile delivery

Traditional leadership	Agile leadership
Command-and-control	Empower-and-enable

Rigid hierarchies	Flat, cross-functional structures
Decision-making at the top	Decentralized, team-based decisions
Detailed planning and control	Adaptive goals and iterative execution
Risk-averse	Experimentation and learning mindset
Annual reviews	Continuous feedback and improvement

Source: own elaboration.

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6. Preparing the organization for iterative delivery

Introduction

Adopting agile delivery methods is not simply a matter of restructuring teams or introducing new tools. It requires a deep cultural and operational shift across the organization: a readiness to work iteratively, adapt quickly, and continuously learn. Without preparing the broader organization for iterative ways of working, agile initiatives often stall or underdeliver (McKinsey and Company, 2020).

This section outlines the foundational elements organizations must have in place to support iterative delivery at scale, from team capabilities to technology, culture, and leadership alignment.

Cultural readiness: embracing uncertainty

The heart of agile is adaptability, and that calls for a growth mindset, where experimentation and learning are encouraged over rigid perfectionism. This is often a significant hurdle in traditional

organizations, especially in the sports business where historical performance, tradition, and brand control have often dictated long-term planning.

To prepare culturally, organizations must do the following.

- Normalize failure as learning: shift the narrative from "failure is bad" to "failure informs better strategy" (Dweck, 2006).
- Encourage ownership: teams must feel empowered to take initiative and adjust based on real-time feedback.
- Foster collaboration across silos: iterative delivery requires frequent cross-departmental collaboration, which challenges hierarchical and siloed structures.

Capability readiness: building multidisciplinary teams

Agile, iterative development requires cross-functional teams with a balance of technical, analytical, and business skills. In the context of the sports industry, this may mean bringing together digital marketers, data scientists, content

creators, and technology specialists to deliver an enhanced fan experience in short, incremental bursts.

Organizations should invest in the following.

- Agile training and onboarding: equip teams with knowledge of agile principles, frameworks (like Scrum or Kanban), and team rituals (e.g., sprint planning, stand-ups).
- T-shaped skills: encourage individuals to build depth in one area (e.g., data engineering) while having a working understanding of adjacent disciplines (e.g., marketing automation or UI/UX).
- Embedded roles: include roles like product owners, scrum masters, and data leads in operational teams, not just tech teams.

Technical readiness: the enabler of iteration

A key enabler of iterative delivery is modern technology infrastructure. Without flexible, modular systems and access to real-time data, the ability to test, learn, and deliver continuously is severely limited.

Elements of technical readiness include the following.

- Cloud-native architecture: enables rapid deployment and scalability (AWS, 2023).

- Continuous integration/continuous delivery (CI/CD) pipelines: automate deployment and reduce release cycles.
- Access to unified data via CDPs: customer data platforms empower teams to iterate based on fan behavior and performance metrics in near real time (Salesforce, 2023).
- Agile tooling: platforms like Jira, Asana, and Trello provide visibility and alignment across distributed teams.

Organizational readiness: aligning strategy and structure

Even with the right people and tech, organizational alignment is critical. Senior leadership must recognize that agility is not just for development teams, it's a company-wide operating model.

Key preparation steps include the following.

- Agile strategy communication: connect roadmap milestones to broader strategic objectives so iterative teams know what they're working toward (KPMG, 2022).
- Flexible funding models: shift from annual, fixed budgets to rolling funding that supports evolving priorities and MVPs.
- Change management support: ensure HR, finance, legal, and compliance teams are aligned to agile cadences and decision-making structures.

Summary table: organizational readiness dimensions

Table 3. Organizational readiness dimensions

Dimension	Key requirement	Example in practice
Culture	Growth mindset, experimentation	Shift from output to outcome orientation
Capabilities	Multidisciplinary, agile-trained teams	Data, tech, marketing and content in one squad
Technology	Flexible, modular architecture	CDPs, cloud platforms, CI/CD pipelines

Organization	Strategy alignment and adaptive funding	Quarterly prioritization cycles, not yearly lock-in

Source: own elaboration.

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Conclusion

From concepts to execution

As sports organizations embrace digital transformation, the shift from vision to value depends not just on strategy, but on execution; and increasingly, execution that is agile, iterative, and adaptive. This reading has outlined how the principles of agile working, originally developed for software development, are now essential tools for modern business delivery across industries.

We began by grounding agile in its origins, a response to rigid, waterfall-like processes that couldn't keep pace with change. We then examined how these principles have evolved into organization-wide practices, touching not just product and IT teams, but marketing, operations, and data roles alike. Agile is no longer a tech methodology; it is a mindset and operating model for digital-era organizations.

Real-world examples from industries like retail, healthcare, and media showed how agile execution enables speed, innovation, and customer-centricity. And we explored the importance of readiness across multiple

layers: cultural, technical, organizational, and human. Without this readiness, agile becomes an empty label, with it, it becomes a strategic advantage.

For sports organizations looking to deliver seamless digital fan experiences, launch new digital services, or drive data-driven innovation, agile methods offer a clear path forward. But agility must be intentional, supported by leadership, and embedded across teams and workflows.

Reading 3 will build directly on these foundations by examining how these concepts translate into the sports industry context, including how clubs and leagues adapt agile frameworks, how sprints and product backlogs align with match calendars and fan engagement goals, and how sports organizations balance tradition with the need to iterate.

Digital transformation in sports is not a single leap, but a series of well-executed steps. Agile is how we make those steps faster, smarter, and more aligned with fan expectations.

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