

Agile Transformation in Traditional Banking Institutions in The United Kingdom

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Abstract

This study examines agile transformation initiatives in traditional banking institutions within the United Kingdom, analyzing the challenges, enablers, and outcomes associated with implementing agile methodologies in highly regulated financial services environments. Through a comprehensive desktop review of academic literature, industry reports, and organizational case studies spanning 2017-2025, this research investigates how traditional UK banks navigate the complex process of organizational transformation while maintaining regulatory compliance and operational stability. The findings reveal that successful agile transformation in banking contexts requires comprehensive organizational change encompassing cultural transformation, leadership development, and digital infrastructure modernization, with only 10% of institutions achieving organization-wide implementation success. The analysis demonstrates that traditional banking institutions face unique implementation challenges related to entrenched hierarchical cultures, risk-averse mindsets, and regulatory compliance requirements that necessitate specialized transformation approaches. Key success factors identified include transformational leadership behaviors, phased implementation strategies, and continuous investment in employee capability development. The research concludes that while agile transformation offers significant potential benefits including improved customer responsiveness and accelerated innovation, achieving sustainable outcomes requires long-term organizational commitment and adaptive change management strategies tailored to the specific context of traditional financial institutions. These findings provide valuable insights for banking practitioners, organizational transformation specialists, and researchers investigating agile implementation in regulated industries.

Keywords: *Agile transformation, traditional banking, organizational agility, digital transformation, UK financial institutions.*

1.1 Introduction

The banking sector in the United Kingdom has undergone unprecedented transformation over the past decade, driven by technological disruption, evolving customer expectations, and increasing competitive pressure from fintech startups and digital-native financial service providers (Christou et al., 2020; Łóska & Uotila, 2024). Traditional banking institutions, once characterized by rigid hierarchical structures and lengthy decision-making processes, are now confronted with the imperative to fundamentally reimagine their operational models to remain competitive in an increasingly dynamic marketplace (Mahadevan et al., 2023). The emergence of agile methodologies, originally developed for software development but now extending across entire organizational ecosystems, presents a compelling framework for banks to enhance their responsiveness, accelerate innovation cycles, and deliver superior customer experiences (Comella-Dorda et al., 2022). This transformation is particularly critical in the UK context, where established financial institutions must navigate complex regulatory environments while simultaneously embracing digital-first approaches that challenge traditional banking paradigms (Brühl, 2022).

The concept of organizational agility has evolved from a tactical software development approach to a strategic imperative that encompasses cultural transformation, structural reorganization, and fundamental shifts in leadership philosophy (Sarhan et al., 2024). Leading international examples, such as ING's comprehensive agile transformation, demonstrate that traditional banks can successfully transition from conventional hierarchical models to networked organizations comprising autonomous, cross-functional teams focused on customer-centric outcomes (Jacobs & Schlatmann, 2017). However, the banking industry's unique characteristics—including stringent regulatory requirements, risk-averse cultures, and complex legacy systems—present distinct challenges that differentiate financial services agile transformations from those in other sectors (Walter, 2021). The integration of agile principles with banking operations requires careful consideration of compliance frameworks, risk management protocols, and the preservation of customer trust while simultaneously fostering innovation and operational flexibility (Radovic-Markovic et al., 2019).

Contemporary research indicates that successful agile transformations in banking institutions extend far beyond the adoption of specific methodologies such as Scrum or Kanban, encompassing broader organizational capabilities including dynamic leadership styles, digital infrastructure modernization, and cultural adaptation toward continuous learning and experimentation (Abeysekara et al., 2024; Probojakti et al., 2024). The sustainability of competitive advantage in modern banking increasingly depends on institutions' ability to rapidly sense market changes, mobilize resources effectively, and reconfigure operational processes to capitalize on emerging opportunities (Franco et al., 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated digital adoption across all customer segments, creating additional urgency for traditional banks to develop agile capabilities that enable swift adaptation to changing market conditions and customer behaviors (Alqahtani, 2025). These developments have positioned agile transformation not merely as an operational enhancement but as a fundamental survival strategy for established banking institutions seeking to maintain market relevance in an era of rapid technological change.

The United Kingdom's banking landscape presents a particularly compelling context for examining agile transformation initiatives, given the sector's combination of globally significant financial institutions, sophisticated regulatory frameworks, and intense competitive dynamics driven by both established European banks and emerging fintech challengers (Di Marcello et al., 2021). Major UK banks have invested billions in digital transformation programs over the past

decade, yet many struggle to achieve the organizational agility demonstrated by their digital-native competitors (Johnston & Gill, 2017). This research gap highlights the critical need for empirical investigation into how traditional banking institutions can successfully navigate the complex process of agile transformation while maintaining operational stability, regulatory compliance, and customer confidence. Understanding the specific enablers, barriers, and outcomes associated with agile transformation in UK banking institutions will provide valuable insights for both practitioners seeking to implement such changes and researchers investigating organizational transformation in highly regulated industries.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Despite extensive investment in digital transformation initiatives, traditional banking institutions in the United Kingdom continue to face significant challenges in achieving the organizational agility necessary to compete effectively with fintech disruptors and digital-native financial service providers (Mahadevan et al., 2023; Walter, 2021). While many UK banks have implemented agile methodologies at the project or departmental level, the majority struggle to scale these approaches across entire organizational structures, resulting in fragmented transformation efforts that fail to deliver the anticipated improvements in customer experience, operational efficiency, and innovation capacity (Comella-Dorda et al., 2022). Research indicates that approximately 90% of banks have initiated digital and agile transformation journeys, yet only 5% report achieving highly successful outcomes, suggesting fundamental gaps in understanding how to effectively implement and sustain agile practices within traditional banking environments (Sarhan et al., 2024; Di Marcello et al., 2021). This disconnect between transformation investment and realized benefits represents a critical problem for UK banking institutions that must simultaneously maintain regulatory compliance, manage complex legacy systems, and preserve customer trust while attempting to develop the rapid response capabilities characteristic of successful agile organizations.

The problem is further compounded by the unique operational constraints inherent in the banking sector, including stringent regulatory requirements, risk management protocols, and established hierarchical cultures that often conflict with the collaborative, experimental, and iterative principles fundamental to agile transformation (Brühl, 2022; Franco et al., 2022). Traditional UK banks face the dual challenge of dismantling entrenched organizational silos and bureaucratic processes while maintaining the stability and security essential for financial services operations (Radovic-Markovic et al., 2019). Additionally, the lack of comprehensive empirical research specifically examining agile transformation outcomes in the UK banking context limits practitioners' ability to identify effective implementation strategies, measure transformation success, and understand the critical factors that differentiate successful agile adoptions from failed initiatives (Abeysekara et al., 2024; Probojakti et al., 2024). This knowledge gap impedes the development of evidence-based approaches to agile transformation that could enable traditional banking institutions to achieve the organizational agility required for sustained competitive advantage in an increasingly dynamic financial services marketplace.

1.3 Research objective

To assess agile transformation in traditional banking institutions in the United Kingdom.

2.1 Literature review

The academic literature on agile transformation in banking institutions has evolved significantly over the past decade, reflecting the growing recognition that organizational agility represents a critical competitive capability rather than merely a project management methodology (Sarhan et al., 2024). Early research focused primarily on the technical aspects of agile software development within financial services, but contemporary studies have expanded to examine the broader organizational implications of agile transformation, including cultural change, leadership adaptation, and structural reorganization (Walter, 2021; Comella-Dorda et al., 2022). Christou et al. (2020) identify three distinct phases of digital transformation in banking institutions—Adapt, Grow, and Transform—with agile methodologies serving as critical enablers across each stage. Their framework demonstrates that successful transformation requires not only technological modernization but also fundamental shifts in organizational mindset, decision-making processes, and customer engagement strategies. Franco et al. (2022) further elaborate on this theme by proposing a continuous organizational agility model specifically designed for banking contexts, emphasizing the importance of entrepreneurial leadership, digital culture, and dynamic capabilities in sustaining competitive advantage. The literature consistently highlights that agile transformation in banking extends far beyond the adoption of specific frameworks such as Scrum or Kanban, encompassing comprehensive organizational redesign that challenges traditional banking paradigms (Radovic-Markovic et al., 2019; Mahadevan et al., 2023).

International case studies provide valuable insights into the practical implementation of agile transformation within large banking institutions, with ING's comprehensive organizational restructuring serving as a frequently cited exemplar of successful transformation (Jacobs & Schlattmann, 2017). ING's transition from a traditional hierarchical structure to a network of autonomous, cross-functional squads organized into tribes demonstrates the feasibility of radical organizational change within established banking contexts. Jacobs and Schlattmann (2017) document significant improvements in time-to-market, employee engagement, and customer satisfaction following ING's agile transformation, while also acknowledging the substantial cultural and operational challenges encountered during the transition process. Similarly, Johnston and Gill (2017) examine Standard Bank's agile transformation journey, highlighting the importance of executive commitment, employee training, and incremental implementation approaches in achieving successful outcomes. These case studies collectively emphasize that agile transformation in banking requires sustained leadership commitment, comprehensive change management strategies, and careful attention to maintaining operational stability during transition periods (Alqahtani, 2025). However, critics argue that the generalizability of these success stories may be limited by specific organizational contexts, regulatory environments, and market conditions that may not apply universally across different banking institutions and geographical regions.

The relationship between digital transformation and organizational agility has emerged as a central theme in contemporary banking literature, with researchers increasingly recognizing the interdependent nature of technological modernization and organizational change (Abeysekara et al., 2024; Probojakti et al., 2024). Łóska and Uotila (2024) demonstrate through their longitudinal case study analysis that digital transformation in corporate banking requires a blended service model that combines technological capabilities with agile organizational structures to deliver superior customer experiences. Their research reveals that banks achieving the most successful digital transformation outcomes are those that integrate agile principles throughout their

organizational design rather than treating agile as a separate initiative. Brühl (2022) provides empirical evidence from the German banking sector indicating that institutions with higher levels of digital maturity are more likely to successfully implement agile methodologies and achieve associated performance improvements. The literature suggests that digital infrastructure modernization enables agile practices by providing the technological foundation for rapid experimentation, iterative development, and real-time customer feedback integration (Christou et al., 2020). However, several studies caution that technology alone is insufficient for achieving organizational agility, emphasizing that cultural transformation, leadership development, and employee skill enhancement are equally critical success factors (Radovic-Markovic et al., 2019; Walter, 2021).

Leadership transformation emerges as a recurring theme throughout the agile banking literature, with multiple studies identifying the critical role of leadership style adaptation in enabling successful organizational change (Alqahtani, 2025; Franco et al., 2022). Abeysekara et al. (2024) provide empirical evidence demonstrating that transformational leadership significantly enhances organizational agility and corporate resilience in banking contexts, while also noting that traditional command-and-control leadership approaches often impede agile transformation efforts. Their quantitative analysis of 185 banking units reveals strong positive correlations between transformational leadership behaviors and organizational agility outcomes, including improved decision-making speed, enhanced customer responsiveness, and increased innovation capacity. Probojakti et al. (2024) extend this analysis by examining the mediating role of organizational agility in the relationship between leadership transformation and sustainable competitive advantage, finding that banks with more agile-oriented leadership achieve superior performance across multiple dimensions. The literature consistently emphasizes that agile transformation requires leaders to shift from directive management styles to facilitative approaches that empower cross-functional teams, encourage experimentation, and foster collaborative problem-solving (Comella-Dorda et al., 2022; Mahadevan et al., 2023). However, research also acknowledges the challenges faced by senior executives in traditional banking institutions who must balance the need for organizational flexibility with regulatory compliance requirements and risk management obligations.

Despite the growing body of research on agile transformation in banking, several significant gaps remain in the academic literature, particularly regarding the specific experiences and outcomes of UK banking institutions (Sarhan et al., 2024). While international case studies provide valuable insights, the unique characteristics of the UK banking sector—including its regulatory framework, competitive dynamics, and organizational cultures—may require context-specific approaches to agile transformation that have not been adequately explored in existing research (Di Marcello et al., 2021). Walter (2021) identifies this limitation in their comprehensive review, noting that much of the existing literature focuses on individual case studies or cross-sectional analyses that may not capture the long-term dynamics and sustainability challenges associated with agile transformation initiatives. Furthermore, methodological limitations in many studies, including small sample sizes, limited longitudinal data, and reliance on self-reported measures, constrain the generalizability of findings and the development of evidence-based implementation guidelines (Franco et al., 2022). The literature also reveals inconsistencies in how organizational agility is conceptualized and measured across different studies, making it difficult to compare results and develop cumulative knowledge about effective transformation practices (Sarhan et al., 2024). These gaps highlight the need for more rigorous empirical research examining agile transformation

outcomes in specific banking contexts, with particular attention to the factors that enable or constrain successful implementation in traditional financial services institutions.

2.3 Theoretical review

The Dynamic Capabilities Theory, originally developed by Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997), provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding agile transformation in traditional banking institutions. This theory posits that organizations achieve sustainable competitive advantage through their ability to sense opportunities and threats, seize valuable opportunities, and transform organizational assets and structures to maintain competitiveness in dynamic environments (Franco et al., 2022; Sarhan et al., 2024). In the context of banking agile transformation, dynamic capabilities manifest as the institution's capacity to rapidly reconfigure operational processes, develop new customer-centric solutions, and adapt organizational structures in response to technological disruption and changing market conditions (Abeysekara et al., 2024). The theory's emphasis on sensing capabilities aligns directly with agile principles of continuous market feedback and customer-centricity, while its focus on seizing capabilities corresponds to banks' need for rapid decision-making and resource mobilization that characterizes successful agile organizations (Probojakti et al., 2024). Furthermore, the transformation dimension of dynamic capabilities theory encompasses the organizational restructuring, cultural change, and process redesign that are fundamental to agile transformation initiatives in traditional banking contexts (Comella-Dorda et al., 2022).

The application of Dynamic Capabilities Theory to agile banking transformation is particularly relevant given the theory's recognition that competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments requires more than static resource optimization—it demands the continuous renewal of organizational capabilities (Di Marcello et al., 2021; Mahadevan et al., 2023). This theoretical perspective explains why traditional banks with substantial financial resources and market positions may still struggle to compete with agile fintech startups if they lack the dynamic capabilities necessary to sense, seize, and transform in response to market disruption (Jacobs & Schlattmann, 2017). The theory's framework suggests that successful agile transformation in banking institutions depends on developing meta-capabilities—the ability to systematically modify existing capabilities and create new ones—rather than simply implementing agile methodologies as isolated practices (Walter, 2021; Christou et al., 2020). Research applying this theoretical lens demonstrates that banks achieving successful agile transformations are those that embed sensing, seizing, and transforming capabilities throughout their organizational fabric, enabling continuous adaptation to evolving customer needs, regulatory requirements, and competitive pressures (Alqahtani, 2025; Brühl, 2022). This theoretical foundation thus provides a comprehensive explanatory framework for understanding how traditional banking institutions can leverage agile transformation to develop and sustain competitive advantage in increasingly dynamic financial services markets.

3.1 Research methodology

This study employs a desktop review methodology, utilizing a systematic analysis of existing academic literature, industry reports, and case studies to examine agile transformation in traditional UK banking institutions. The research methodology follows a structured approach to secondary data collection and analysis, drawing from peer-reviewed academic journals, professional consulting reports, and documented organizational case studies spanning the period from 2017 to 2025. Data sources were systematically identified through comprehensive searches

of academic databases including Business Source Premier, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar, using key terms such as "agile transformation," "banking institutions," "organizational agility," and "digital transformation" in combination with geographical specifiers related to the United Kingdom and European banking sectors. The analytical framework incorporates thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns, trends, and critical success factors across multiple sources, while maintaining focus on the specific context of traditional banking institutions undergoing agile transformation, with quality assessment criteria applied to ensure the reliability and validity of included sources.

4.1 Results and findings

The analysis of existing literature reveals that traditional UK banking institutions face significant implementation challenges when attempting to scale agile transformation beyond individual departments or project teams, with organizational culture emerging as the primary barrier to successful transformation (Walter, 2021; Brühl, 2022). Evidence from multiple case studies demonstrates that banks with deeply entrenched hierarchical structures and risk-averse cultures struggle to adopt the collaborative, experimental, and iterative approaches fundamental to agile methodologies (Comella-Dorda et al., 2022; Mahadevan et al., 2023). The findings indicate that successful agile transformations in banking contexts require comprehensive cultural change initiatives that challenge traditional command-and-control management styles and empower cross-functional teams to make autonomous decisions within defined parameters (Jacobs & Schlatmann, 2017). Research consistently shows that institutions achieving positive transformation outcomes invest significantly in change management programs, employee training, and leadership development to support the cultural shift from bureaucratic processes to agile ways of working (Alqahtani, 2025; Franco et al., 2022). However, the literature also reveals that cultural transformation in traditional banking institutions typically requires 18-24 months to achieve meaningful impact, with many organizations experiencing initial resistance from middle management layers who perceive agile approaches as threatening to established power structures and career progression pathways.

Leadership transformation emerges as a critical success factor, with findings demonstrating strong correlations between transformational leadership behaviors and successful agile transformation outcomes in banking institutions (Abeysekara et al., 2024; Probojakti et al., 2024). The analysis reveals that banks achieving superior transformation results are led by executives who actively model agile behaviors, including rapid decision-making, customer-centricity, and willingness to experiment with new approaches despite uncertainty about outcomes (Di Marcello et al., 2021). Evidence from ING's transformation demonstrates that leadership commitment must extend beyond verbal support to include structural changes such as flattening organizational hierarchies, redistributing decision-making authority, and implementing performance metrics that reward collaboration and innovation rather than individual achievement (Jacobs & Schlatmann, 2017). The findings also indicate that successful agile transformations require leaders to develop new competencies in coaching, facilitation, and servant leadership, representing a fundamental departure from traditional banking leadership models focused on control and risk mitigation (Christou et al., 2020; Walter, 2021). Research suggests that banks investing in comprehensive leadership development programs specifically designed to support agile transformation achieve significantly higher rates of successful implementation compared to institutions that attempt transformation without corresponding leadership capability development.

Digital infrastructure modernization emerges as both an enabler and a prerequisite for successful agile transformation in traditional banking institutions, with findings revealing strong interdependencies between technological capabilities and organizational agility (Łóska & Uotila, 2024; Radovic-Markovic et al., 2019). The analysis demonstrates that banks with legacy systems architectures face significant constraints in implementing agile practices, as outdated technology platforms limit the rapid iteration and continuous deployment capabilities essential to agile methodologies (Christou et al., 2020). Evidence from successful transformation cases indicates that institutions achieving positive outcomes typically invest in cloud-based infrastructure, microservices architectures, and automated testing frameworks that support the rapid development and deployment cycles characteristic of agile organizations (Brühl, 2022; Franco et al., 2022). The findings also reveal that digital transformation and agile transformation are mutually reinforcing processes, with each enabling the other through improved data analytics capabilities, enhanced customer feedback mechanisms, and accelerated product development cycles (Abeysekara et al., 2024). However, research indicates that technology investments alone are insufficient for achieving organizational agility, with multiple studies emphasizing that digital infrastructure modernization must be accompanied by corresponding changes in organizational processes, performance metrics, and employee skill sets to realize anticipated benefits.

The analysis reveals mixed outcomes regarding the sustainability and scalability of agile transformation initiatives in traditional UK banking institutions, with significant variations in long-term success rates across different organizational contexts and implementation approaches (Sarhan et al., 2024; Mahadevan et al., 2023). Findings indicate that approximately 44% of banking institutions have initiated some form of agile transformation, but only 10% have achieved organization-wide implementation with sustained performance improvements over periods exceeding two years (Di Marcello et al., 2021; Walter, 2021). Evidence suggests that banks achieving sustainable transformation outcomes typically adopt phased implementation strategies that begin with pilot programs in specific business units before gradually expanding agile practices across the entire organization (Comella-Dorda et al., 2022; Johnston & Gill, 2017). The research also reveals that regulatory compliance requirements and risk management obligations create unique challenges for banking institutions that may not be encountered in other industries attempting agile transformation, necessitating specialized approaches that balance agility with regulatory adherence (Brühl, 2022; Franco et al., 2022). Furthermore, findings demonstrate that banks maintaining long-term agile transformation success invest continuously in capability development, organizational learning, and adaptation of agile practices to evolving market conditions, suggesting that agile transformation represents an ongoing process rather than a discrete change initiative with defined endpoints (Probojakti et al., 2024; Alqahtani, 2025).

5.1 Conclusions

The analysis of agile transformation in traditional UK banking institutions reveals that while organizational agility represents a critical competitive capability, successful implementation requires comprehensive organizational change that extends far beyond the adoption of specific agile methodologies. The findings demonstrate that cultural transformation, leadership development, and digital infrastructure modernization are interdependent prerequisites for achieving sustainable agile transformation outcomes, with institutions that address all three dimensions simultaneously achieving significantly higher success rates than those focusing on individual components. The research indicates that traditional banking institutions face unique implementation challenges related to regulatory compliance, risk management requirements, and

entrenched hierarchical cultures that necessitate specialized transformation approaches tailored to the financial services context. While the potential benefits of agile transformation are substantial—including improved customer responsiveness, accelerated innovation cycles, and enhanced competitive positioning—the evidence suggests that achieving these outcomes requires sustained organizational commitment, significant resource investment, and long-term change management strategies that may extend beyond traditional project timelines, with only a small percentage of banking institutions currently achieving organization-wide agile transformation success.

6.1 Recommendations

Based on the research findings, traditional UK banking institutions should adopt a phased transformation approach that begins with pilot programs in specific business units to demonstrate agile value before attempting organization-wide implementation, while simultaneously investing in comprehensive leadership development programs that equip executives and middle managers with the coaching and facilitation skills necessary to support agile ways of working. Banks should prioritize cultural transformation initiatives alongside technological modernization, implementing change management strategies that address resistance to new working methods while establishing performance metrics that reward collaboration, experimentation, and customer-centricity rather than individual achievement and risk avoidance. Financial institutions should develop specialized agile frameworks that accommodate regulatory compliance requirements and risk management obligations, ensuring that transformation efforts maintain operational stability and regulatory adherence while enabling increased organizational flexibility and responsiveness. Finally, banking leaders should recognize agile transformation as an ongoing organizational capability development process rather than a discrete project, establishing continuous learning mechanisms, regular transformation assessment practices, and adaptive implementation strategies that evolve with changing market conditions and organizational needs to ensure sustainable competitive advantage in the dynamic financial services landscape.

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