Too many bad meetings?
The meeting culture in Icelandic software companies
TOO MANY BAD MEETINGS?
- THE MEETING CULTURE IN ICELANDIC SOFTWARE COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges in today’s organizations is communication. Communication is a critical factor when it comes to gaining mutual understanding, raise concerns and make important decisions, not to mention to support good team spirit and unity. One of the most important types of communication are meetings. Meetings are of all shapes and sizes, planned or unplanned, distant or face to face. The goal of this paper is to examine employee experiences and attitudes towards their organizational meetings with a focus on the software industry. Is, in fact, too much time and money spent on ineffective meetings in the industry today? To answer this, software company employees answered questions and gave their view on a few statements that indicate if their organization is using the best practices when it comes to running good meetings. A special focus was on comparing Agile meetings to other company meetings in those companies that claim to be using Agile in their day to day operation.

First results indicate that people find their Agile meetings to be more effective than other meetings within the organization. They have a clearer agenda, clearer output, better follow-up and better facilitation than non-Agile meetings. They also find their time better spent at Agile meetings. Only around 20% of subjects agree on the fact that they find their time well spent on non-Agile meetings at Agile companies.
1. INTRODUCTION

Meetings can be a strong and effective tool if used wisely but they can also be ineffective, useless and even harmful. If the importance of meetings is not obvious to the attendees they might undermine the management skills of the moderator hosting the meeting and increase negativity towards meetings in general. Meetings are a vital part of kicking off new projects, celebrating milestones or closing off projects. They are also used for status updates, information sharing, decision making, problem solving, innovation and team building. They can be planned and formal or they can be an ad-hoc discussion at lunch or by the watercooler. These meetings can all be extremely important and effective and they can also be a waste of time and resources and as a consequence a waste of money.

Most software companies today are, or try to be, Agile. Agile is a set of values and principles set to uncover better ways of developing software (www.agilemanifesto.org). Agile is as indicated by the term focused on flexibility, responding to change, collaboration and interaction. Companies that consider themselves Agile therefore often focus on personal interaction rather than comprehensive documentation and hard plans. As a consequence many Agile frameworks, depend on frequent interaction within teams and with stakeholders. One of the most common Agile frameworks today is Scrum. Scrum, as other Agile frameworks rely heavily on communication. The average Scrum team engages in various meetings each week as a part of their Agile framework, such as planning meetings, retrospective meetings and daily stand-up meetings, additional to other meetings such as architectural meetings, informational meetings and staff meetings.

On my journey towards becoming a Master of Project Management (MPM) I have encountered the importance of good meetings and good meeting habits a number of times. Communication is after all one of the most important factors in Project Management and meetings are usually the best platform to communicate. As most people can relate to the effectiveness of a good meeting, most people can also relate to the waste of time spent on bad ones. So after some informal discussion to various people I am intrigued to know: When looking at the Icelandic software industry: Is there too much time and resources spent on ineffective meetings?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Discussion on hallways and during coffee breaks tend to imply negativity towards meetings, people complain about time poorly spent and sigh when meeting requests appear in their inbox. This is mainly based on the author’s personal experience and is the foundation for this research. Do people indeed find their time spent in meetings to be time wasted?

The importance of communication in Project work and Project Management is well known. In fact, as collaboration and cross-functional work increases, as is the case in most software companies today, the success of a project relies heavily on communication. As described by Thea Turner (2010) companies rely on emails, wiki-pages or any one of the number of collaboration and communication tools available. When comparing these communication tools, face to face communication stands out
in more ways than one. The weakness of meetings as a communication tool is the fact that it can be challenging to get all stakeholders to attend the same meeting and the meetings can be extremely time consuming. On the positive side however, the non-verbal communication, face expression and nuances that are clear and visible to the attendees gives meetings advantage over other communication. The feedback is immediate and mutual understanding is much easier to gain when you listen actively, translate and negotiate. (Turner, 2010).

2.1 Communication through meetings

Projects can require people from different disciplines, different teams and with different skill sets to work together. There should not be delays while information travels through team and departmental boundaries. (Lock, 2013). To make sure these delays won’t happen and do not block progress, organizations rely heavily on communication.

Communication can be formal and informal, it can be verbal and non-verbal, it can be oral and written and it can be distance and face to face. In this paper the focus is on meetings, verbal communication that can however be of various different kinds, formal or informal (www.educba.com). There are many reasons why meetings are important. They are used for sharing information, collect and discuss data, they are used for brainstorming and decision making, they are used when changes are considered, disputes and problems are resolved and they are also used for innovation, planning and team building to mention a few.

When reading through literature on Project Management such as Project Management by Lock, or the number of articles and blogposts on meetings, there seems to be a fairly good consensus on what meetings need to contain to be effective. A good meeting management according to the PMBOK (A guide to the project management body of knowledge, 2017), includes a prepared agenda, having meetings on schedule, that the appropriate participants are invited, that the meetings don’t get derailed, that the meetings are well managed/facilitated and that all actions are recorded and the responsibility allocated. Other items typically mentioned when running a good meeting are a clear purpose, attendees engagements, trust and a clear output through sharable results. In modern development companies most of planning and follow-up is addressed through small team meetings, usually Agile ceremonial meetings.

2.2 Agile meetings

The beginning of Agile as we know it goes back to 2001 as the Agile Manifesto was written by seventeen people at a ski resort in Utah. The purpose was to find a common ground, to set values and culture for development organizations to deliver good products to customers. The Manifesto for Agile Software Development as stated at agilemanifesto.org is seen in figure 1.
"Manifesto for Agile Software Development"

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it. Through this work we have come to value:

- **Individuals and interactions** over processes and tools
- **Working software** over comprehensive documentation
- **Customer collaboration** over contract negotiation
- **Responding to change** over following a plan

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.”

Figure 1: The Manifesto for Agile software development, written in 2001.

Additionally, there are twelve principles behind the Agile Manifesto that can also be seen at agilemanifesto.org. These principles support the manifesto and confirm the flexibility and continuous improvements that Agile stands for.

When looking at these principles it seems clear that Agile methods are designed to deal with uncertainty and changes and are highly dependent on communication and coordination face to face (Strode, 2011). It addresses welcoming changes at every stage in the development, team work and sustainability and it encourages teams to be self-organizing and iterative. It also states that the most effective way of conveying information within a development team is face to face communication. These requirements of iteration and communication are the foundation for the number of Agile related meetings in software development today as seen in various guides on Scrum such as Essential Scrum (Rubin, 2013). At the 12th annual state of Agile report, published by VersionOne in 2018, 90% of respondents using Agile practices in their organization used daily stand-up meetings as an Agile technique employed in their daily work, 88% used sprint planning meetings and 85% retrospective meetings (VersionOne, 2018). Other meetings, such as sprint/iteration review and estimation session are also fairly common in these organizations.

2.3 Wasted time and money in meetings?

Many organizations complain about too many meetings or ineffective meetings. Meetings can only be considered successful if all members feel that they have gained purpose and that all action items agreed up on will benefit the project. (Lock, 2013). In the United States there are up to 55 million meetings a day (Keith, 2015), which is around 6 hours per week in a meeting for the average employee, managers however, can spend up to 80% of their work time in meetings (Mroz, 2018).

Meetings are not only costly when it comes to time and resources, it also tends to build up negativity amongst employees if they don’t consider their time well spent (Mroz, 2018).
In an article from 1985, Franklin Parker addressed the productivity of meetings and ranked them as the most serious waste of time, ahead of golf, to be more exact. It is however clear, even in Parker’s article, that we cannot eliminate meetings altogether, in many cases they are necessary. He argued that unnecessary meetings should be eliminated and productive use should be made of the meetings we cannot eliminate (Parker, 1985). This reflects to the more recent literature on the effectiveness of meetings and what makes meetings effective. In project management and in meeting management today the importance of meetings is a pretty well known fact and also the importance of those meetings to be productive. The first thing to ask when scheduling a meeting is if this meeting is really needed. If there is a clear goal for the meeting and if there is another more effective way to achieve that goal (getminute.com, 2017).

Moe et al (2018) recommend to identify as early as possible all scheduled meetings as a way to develop a common understanding and to control the number of meetings. They do that by ensuring that a sufficient number of scheduled meetings are at the beginning of a project which are then reduced and the coordination is kept more informal as the work progresses. This is done to avoid too many unnecessary meetings. They also recommend revisiting and balancing the meetings as necessary and urge people to change, terminate and add new scheduled meeting as needed. (Moe 2018). This supports what is written above about not scheduling unnecessary meetings.

Meetings are a significant investment for most organizations, many of them are considered unproductive and data collected by Rogelberg et al suggest that time is not being used effectively in meetings. Wasted time in meetings has direct cost in the form of salary of the participant’s time. Additionally it can induce frustration, stress and fatigue. Interestingly, too few meetings can evoke these same feelings when employees feel deprived of important information. Thus it seems that both too few and too many meetings can induce negativity (Rogelberg, 2011).

Software projects are usually dominated by meetings. As mentioned before, software companies often rely on constant feedback and communication within and between team and stakeholders throughout the project time. For those participants, not all meetings are enjoyable and they have high impact on individuals and groups, and therefore have a direct influence on team performance and project success. When looking at the interaction within a meeting, good and positive meeting style has a direct influence on success according to a research by Kurt Schneider in 2018.

Research indicates that the amount of time spent in meetings is steadily increasing, likely as a consequence of the increase of teamwork and project oriented organizations as cited in Geimer et al (2015). In the same article it is cited that the number of unproductive meetings are estimated as high as 41,9%, which results in high cost in wages and morale. At an international investigation performed by Geimer et al by collecting comments on meeting effectiveness, less than half of the participants were positive towards meetings in general. The positive comments were generally regarding importance or purpose but the negative ones were mainly focused on the structure of meetings, on poor planning and a lack of an agenda. Majority of recommendations for improvements were focused on planning, structure and organization and their results indicate that most of the meetings found to be ineffective are failing due to a lack of implementation of good meeting practices such as a good preparation, agenda and punctuality (Geimer, 2015).
3. RESEARCH METHOD

The research was intended to get the view and opinion of people working in the software industry in Iceland, on the efficiency of meetings held at their organization. *If they in fact, find their time well spent at meetings and if anything, what would make their meetings more effective.* An organization in this context could be a software company as well as an IT department of a bigger company.

3.1 Research tools

When choosing a research tool or a method to use, some possibilities were observed. Since this has to do with views and opinions and not cold hard facts and figures the selection was between the qualitative research method of in depth interviews to a few selected participants and the quantitative method of a questionnaire, or a mixture of both. The quantitative method was chosen since it allows and emphasizes measurements and statistical analysis of data collected through polls and surveys, with the possibility of a mixture of both as a contingency plan if not enough responses would come out of the survey.

The survey was created with a questionnaire from VersionOne (2018) as a comparison for background, company size and Agile knowledge and usage, and for demographic questions. Likert type scale was then used to cover respondent’s opinion of the meetings at their organization, if they found their meetings effective, if they found their meeting to have a clear agenda, clear output and follow-up, if they found their meetings well organized and if they found their time well spent on meetings. Those that claimed to be at an Agile company were asked separately of their Agile meetings and other company or staff meetings. Those who did not claim to work at an Agile company answered on meetings in general. Finally all participants were asked what would be the first thing to improve to make their meetings more effective.

3.2 Sample group

The target population of this survey were all people working in the software industry in Iceland, regardless of status or role. The hope was to get as many responses as possible, quantity over quality, at least for the first time around. Facebook and acquaintances within the software industry were used to spread the survey as widely as possible.

The survey was open from April 8th till April 14th 2019 and got overall 82 responses.

3.3 Procedure

A quick quantitative survey was sent out using the familiar and simple form created by Google, Google Forms. The survey was distributed via the power of social media, through the author’s personal Facebook page additional to specific software community Facebook pages. The survey was sent out in English so the English speaking employees of Icelandic software companies could participate.
Respondents were first asked about the number of employees at their company and their knowledge of Agile and were given the reply options, very little/no knowledge, moderate knowledge, good knowledge and extremely good knowledge. Respondents were then asked if their organization practiced Agile.

Companies that claimed to be Agile were then asked which Agile methodology they were using where they could choose Scrum, Kanban, Custom Hybrid or write their own answer. Agile companies were then asked separately on their Agile meeting and non-Agile meetings. Non-Agile meetings were described as all meetings that don’t fall under the Agile ceremonial category, such as unplanned meetings, staff meetings, informational meetings etc. Respondents at companies that don’t claim to be Agile were asked on meetings in general.

Respondents were asked if they found their organizations host a reasonable amount of meetings and were as a follow up asked to give their opinion (in hours per week) what would be a reasonable amount of meetings. They were then asked to set their opinion on a Likert scale, a linear scale from one to five (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree or disagree, agree or strongly agree) on the following questions.

- My organizations meetings are effective
- My organizations meetings have a clear agenda
- My organizations meetings have a clear output/action items
- Action items from meetings are owned and followed through
- My organizations meetings are well organized/facilitated
- I find my time well spent on meetings

Finally participants were offered to offer their suggestions for improvements by answering one open question “What would be the first thing to improve to make your organizations meetings more effective?”

3.4 Limitations

Obviously by using this snowball effect in sampling that social media offers, the author loses the control of the sampling and who are participating and risks a community bias through the friendship and relationship to those spreading the survey.

Other consideration is that if companies are considered Agile or not is in this survey valued by the participants themselves. Companies that use Scrum or some Agile related tools are not necessarily Agile and companies that don’t use specific methodologies can be fairly agilist. There are a few factors that assess a team’s agility according to an Agile Assessment by VersionOne, those factors are not valued or confirmed especially here.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

In this section the main results from the survey will be laid out. Participant’s Agile knowledge and background will be discussed, respondents view on their meeting
effectiveness and finally their reflections regarding room to improve their meeting culture.

Responses were 82 in total, 73.2% were male, 24.4% female and 2.4% preferred not to say which reflects to numbers previously published in relation to Europe Code Week where it is stated that around 75% of employees in technology are male (www.forritun.is). The age was pretty evenly distributed through the options given as seen in figure 1.

Figure 1: Age distribution of all participants in the survey

Respondents were asked about the highest degree or level of school completed and 41.5% hold a master’s degree and 43.9% a bachelor’s degree. 2.4% have finished a Doctor’s degree and the rest have technical training or some college credit without a degree.

43.9% of those who responded work as developers, 18.3% as managers and 9.8% as project managers. The rest of those who responded checked for one of the following category, designer, program manager, product manager, agile coach, team leader or other.

Figure 2: Distribution of company roles of all participants in the survey
4.1 Agile background and knowledge

The size of the organization that respondents are working for was looked into additional to their knowledge in Agile since it was found to be a factor of importance if practicing Agile would change people’s view on meetings in any way.

Almost 90% of all participants rated their Agile knowledge as moderate to excellent but just over 75% claimed to be practicing Agile.

4.2 Meetings within Agile companies

When looking particularly at those who claim to be working within an Agile company or a company that practices Agile the first thing they were asked was what methodology from Agile they were using. This was considered an important factor since there is a number of ceremonial Agile meetings within each methodology that should be taken into account.
In the survey over 60% of participants were using some kind of a custom hybrid, Scrum and Kanban combination or moving towards DevOps which is another rising Agile method (Zhu, 2016). When asking the same question in his MPM project in 2018, Einar Bjarnason found that around 70% of respondents were using Scrum, 13% Kanban and only around 17% Custom Hybrid or Scrumban.

83% found their organization host a reasonable amount of Agile meetings and around 74% of non-Agile meetings. When asked what would be the reasonable amount of Agile meetings that answers varied from zero to seven hours per week with the mean being two hours per week (38,7% of those respondents that claim to practice Agile). The difference was even more when asked about non-Agile meetings where 17,7% found one hour per week on meetings to be reasonable, and the same 17,7% wanted to have two hours per week. 12,9% voted for four hours a week and 14,5% voted for five.
When asked on the effectiveness of meetings, if they had a clear agenda, clear output/action items, clear ownership and follow-up and if the meetings were well organized, Agile meetings scored higher on all factors (figure 6) In fact, when performing a standard t-test there was a significant statistical difference (with a p-value below 0.05) in all factors. The figure shows the average score to each question on the range from one to five, where one equals Strongly disagree and five equals Strongly agree.

4.3 Meetings within non-Agile companies

When looking at companies that don’t claim to be Agile, respondents were asked to answer on all meetings, planning meetings as well as unplanned meetings and staff meetings to mention a few.

When asked the same questions as Agile companies related to the effectiveness of meetings, meetings in Non-Agile companies landed in between the results from Agile and non-Agile meetings in Agile companies on the linear scale from one to five as seen in figure 7.

![Figure 7: The average of the respondents from participants working in Agile companies and non-Agile companies. Effectiveness of certain aspects of meeting (Agile and non-Agile) were rated on a linear scale from one to five.]

Since over 75% of responses came from people working in Agile companies the sample group for non-Agile companies was relatively small.

4.4 Time well spent in meetings?

When participants were asked if they found their time well spent on meetings the results were as follows. The average score for Agile meetings was 3.58 on a one to five scale, 2.87 for non-Agile meetings and 3.10 on general meetings within non-Agile companies (figure 8).
When comparing meetings within Agile companies, the graph in figure 9 indicates that people in general find their time better spent on Agile meetings than other company meetings. The change in number of responses generates from the fact that not all employees in Agile companies attend Agile ceremonial meetings. The effectiveness of non-Agile meetings and meetings at non-Agile companies relate to numbers in Geimers article previously mentioned, where as high as 41.9% of meetings were found to be unproductive.

Figure 8: Average responds regarding time well spent in meetings on a linear scale from one to five.

Figure 9: Comparison of responds regarding Agile vs non-Agile meetings in Agile companies. The graphs demonstrate of all responses on a linear scale from one to five.
At the end all participants were asked to answer the following question: What would be the first thing to improve to make your organizations meetings more effective? The answers were obviously many and different but most of them were focused on a clear meeting agenda, a good meeting structure and management, clear ownership of action items and follow-up, meeting notes or documentation of sort and finally time (figure 10). Shorter and more focused meetings also is an important factor to improve meetings according to the answers given. This also relates to Geimers results (2018) that negativity towards meetings is mostly related to lack in meeting structure, planning and management.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>What would be the first thing to improve to make your organizations meetings more effective?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A clear meeting agenda</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A clear ownership of action items/followup</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better meeting management/facilitation</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better time management</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better meeting notes</td>
<td>11%</td>
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*Figure 10: Suggestion on improvements grouped together and classified and then calculated as a ratio of all responses.*

5. DISCUSSION

Most people have found themselves in meetings they don’t see value in, they are not really stakeholders in the matter, the meeting has an unclear agenda or the meeting item could simply be a short and focused informational e-mail. Complaints about time poorly spent and distraction from “real” work are not uncommon in software companies, as well as in other organizations. But do employees really find their time poorly spent in meetings?

I think it is a fairly common knowledge that meetings as such are a very important tool in managing projects and teams. Meetings are in fact one of the most or to some, the most, important tool to be used for communication, to reach for mutual understanding and to build and gain good team spirit to mention a few. Importance of meetings is mentioned in PMBOK such as in most Project Management books and blogs on meetings and meeting habits and those I’ve read agree in all major factors on their importance.

A good meeting should contain a clear, structured and time boxed agenda, excellent facilitation to make sure offline topics are indeed taken offline, the right attendees who are engaged and present, meeting notes that all attendees can access and that important points and decisions have a defined ownership of action items so that people can easily follow up on their items. This is generally agreed up on in Project Management literature and is considered best practices when it comes to meeting management. It is therefore interesting that when asked what would be the first thing to improve to make their meetings more effective 70% of the participants mentioned one of the items above generally considered as best practices. Only 2.5%
of those who answered were happy with their current status and did not offer any suggestions for improvements and 7% chose not to answer.

The difference in opinion towards Agile meetings from other general meetings is clearly stated in figure 11 where respondents not only find their Agile meetings to have a better meeting structure in general, they also find their time better spent at those meetings. This applies to both non-Agile meetings at Agile companies and to non-Agile companies but one should bear in mind that the non-Agile sample group was small which could bias the comparison. Agile meetings versus non-Agile meetings in organizations that do practice Agile is however a more valid comparison since those questions were answered by the same people.

Figure 11: Comparison of all statements in the survey on a linear scale from one to five.

But why do employees find their time better spent at Agile meetings than other organizational meetings?

When reading the Agile manifesto and the number of articles and books related to communication within Agile, the importance of communication comes abundantly clear (Strode, 2011). Ceremonial Agile meetings tend to follow certain guidelines so the purpose, length and expected outcome of each meeting should be rather clear to all participants (Rubin, 2013). Is this clear common knowledge of an expected outcome and other Agile guidelines the reason for this positivity towards Agile meetings? Or are organizations just sending out too many unclear meeting invites in general?

Good meeting culture can have a great impact on team unity and team spirit. Full engagement while present is crucial and in many modern companies employees are actually encouraged to leave a meeting when they find the meeting to be unproductive, or to move to a place where they are in fact contributing or adding value (www.openspaceworld.com). Positivity towards meetings usually results in more positivity in meetings. As mentioned by Schneider, good and positive meeting
habits have direct impact on success and positive mood has been shown to facilitate action and enhance task performance. Meetings that show value for employees increase their positivity towards those meetings and it is in fact quite worrying if only around 20% can agree on the fact that they find their time well spent on meetings as by participants on general meetings at Agile companies.

There are a lot of articles and blog posts on bad meetings, how to do better meetings, stop wasting time in ineffective meetings and so on. Let’s not forget that according to Parker, meetings are more waste of time than golf (assuming here that Parker is not a golf enthusiast) and in this research it is indicated that people don’t find their time as well spent at meetings as one would hope. Note however, that in this current research only 10% of Agile meetings were marked as time poorly spent and 30% of non-Agile meetings (figure 9) and by the above mentioned blogs on bad meetings as well as Geimers results from 2015 (where he mentioned numbers up to 40% of time poorly spent at meetings) it would not have been surprising if the numbers would have been even higher. Geimer also pointed out that the comments he collected indicate that better meeting structure and clearer focus could improve meeting experience by far. This research indicates the same thing, both by looking at participants suggestions for improvements and by the positivity towards Agile meetings over other meetings. It is highly likely that better meeting preparation and management would improve employee experience in meetings and boost up the positivity, the structure and clarity is most likely the factor that separates Agile meetings from general employee meetings.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Meetings should represent a huge value to both companies and employees by being a venue of communication, discussion and decision making. In the software industry there is much need for agility. Speed, constant changes and continuous need for mutual understanding is a common denominator when it comes to software companies and those are mainly communicated though meetings.

It should be fairly easy to improve the meeting culture within companies by dedicating to best practices when it comes to doing good meetings, by good preparation and decent meeting management. And one could assume that by improving meetings, people’s positivity towards meetings would rise as well.

This paper does not answer the question if software company employees spend too much time in ineffective meetings, it does however indicate that these employees feel as they are spending too much time on ineffective meetings. They feel, in many cases, their meetings to be lacking the factors considered to be best practices when it comes to effective meetings such as a clear agenda and ownership of follow up items. By setting some guidelines and of course by following those guidelines at every meeting a crucial first step would be taken to improve meeting culture and minimizing the risk of bad meetings.
7. REFERENCES


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