

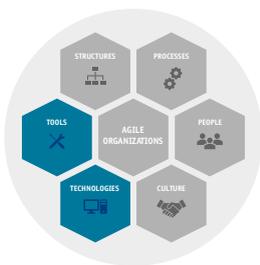
» *The most important thing when working with others is supporting the colleagues, because there are many people in large companies who do not like to collaborate and do not accept advice or decisions from someone with a lower hierarchical status. Here the superiors are asked to weigh in and support.* «

Alexander Wilke, Global Head of Communications, thyssenkrupp AG

New leadership roles

Three leadership roles are becoming increasingly important (e.g. Rutz, 2017; De Smet, 2018; Lawler & Worley, 2015):

- ▶ **The advisor** has a trust-based relationship with their employees. This role includes providing guidance and assisting in upcoming questions. The advisor should act as an example. Therefore, it is important to know and reflect on one's own values, needs and motives because they are the basis for acting authentically as a role model. Those who know their strengths and weaknesses and thus their own 'road map' are capable of meeting others with appreciation, openness and respect. They inspire people.
- ▶ **The multiplier:** In this role, the leader is responsible for transferring knowledge and experience. By providing platforms and channels to articulate, his/her task is to convey the big picture and ensure transparency. Multipliers break down the strategy into clear and easily remembered messages.
- ▶ **The coach:** The most important role for leaders in agile organizations is to support employees' individual responsibility. Leaders should actively involve employees in decision-making processes. A shift from being a controller to being a supporter and enabler of employees is essential. To do so, coaching and feedback skills are needed. Leaders must build up the people needed and equip them with suitable skills and management tools (Zerfass et al., 2018). Their task is to evaluate, coach, and develop people – but without traditional direct oversight. This includes matching talent to the right roles and value-creation opportunities. Organizations can adopt a set of talent management practices that encourage employees to learn and develop (Kiesenbauer, 2018).



APPLYING AGILE TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGIES

Agile tools and practices such as Scrum, Kanban, Design Thinking, Sprints, etc. usually are the first things that come to mind when thinking about agility. However, from a strategic perspective such methods are for now the least important issue for communication executives. Nevertheless, a sound knowledge in this area is needed.

The use of agile tools is most efficient under certain conditions such as initially unknown solutions, modularized work or close collaboration with target groups. Such conditions exist for many product development functions, marketing projects or strategic-planning activities. Many companies rely on a mix of experienced and specifically trained staff and external coaches to

apply these techniques. Communication leaders should document appropriate approaches in toolboxes (Zerfass et al., 2018) and build in-house competencies.

As many are still not familiar with the terms and concepts, a brief overview of the three most commonly applied tools will be given here. Many tools are pretty easy to test out in smaller teams or projects. Still, it remains important to maintain a trial and error attitude, and not to follow the methodology to the letter; each team can adapt it to its needs. Often, teams also mix these techniques with non-agile techniques. (Komus & Kuberg, 2017; West & Grant, 2010)

Kanban

Originally developed at Toyota in the 1950s to steer production, Kanban is used today by project managers in different fields to make projects faster and more efficient. It seeks to reduce lead times, the amount of work in process and to secure a continuous workflow. Work items are visualized on a 'Kanban Board' to give the team an overview of the progress and process. Work is pulled as capacity permits, rather than work being pushed into the process when requested.

The most popular way of doing this is by manually advancing sticky notes in different colors from 'To-Do' to 'Doing' to 'Done' columns on large whiteboards. Today there are also web-based solutions for Kanban Boards, but traditional whiteboards are often preferred in order to visualize the ongoing workflow for everyone. The sticky notes symbolize a task that is broken down into a manageable

amount of work, mostly between two or three hours. A daily 15-minute stand-up meeting informs every team member about the current status of all tasks and offers an opportunity to talk about it. The level of detail is down to the users, but in general the Kanban Board should not contain too many parallel tasks. This way, it is ensured that tasks flow smoothly and without delay over the board. Kanban's flexibility allows it to be overlaid onto existing workflows, systems and processes without disrupting what is already successfully in place.

Kanban can be easily implemented in any type of organization. The method is designed to meet minimal resistance and thus encourages small, continuous, and incremental changes to the current process.

(Anderson, 2010; Kanbanize, 2018; Sugimori et al., 1977)

WORKING WITH KANBAN AT COMDIRECT

Given the fact that agility is closely tied to start-up mentality, digitalization, and speed of innovation, becoming more agile was a natural progression for comdirect. The online bank started its business 24 years ago but still retains its disruptive start-up mentality today. Disruption and change are ingrained in its business strategy and looking for structures and concepts that decrease the 'product-to-market' time is essential to its success.

With this in mind, comdirect started a change program with four pilot units in 2014 in order to become more agile. The change program focuses especially on executives and teams with the aim of developing a different concept of leadership based on coaching and enabling staff. The process was supported by an external coach who introduced the pilot units to agile tools such as Kanban.



One of the pilots was corporate communications – a team with ten employees. The initial impetus was to become faster and more efficient in dealing with the tasks at hand. The goal was for every colleague within CC to be able to handle every job. The team decided to work in a more topic-related fashion instead of focusing on different channels. Tasks are allocated following the pull instead of push principle: Self-determined product owners declare themselves responsible for upcoming topics and build their teams. The aim is to initiate more self-organization, transparency, and trust.

The team uses a mixture of different Kanban Boards to organize and prioritize its work: an overall board for the whole team, project boards that are linked to the departmental boards, and in some cases personal Kanban boards managed by the team members themselves. The overall Kanban Board is the heart of the team office and daily stand-up meetings keep everybody informed. The change process was supported by moving into an open-plan office.



»Stop starting – start finishing!«

Annette Siragusano is Head of Corporate Communications at comdirect bank AG, one of the leading direct banks in Germany (net income of € 71.544 million in 2017 | 1,450 employees). Since three years, Siragusano and her team have been working with Kanban. Comdirect has invested heavily in digital technologies, publishing the first online banking app and launching a “start-up garage” for financial technology start-ups.



What was your motivation to start the agile journey with your team at comdirect?

As a direct bank we are especially hit by the digital transformation. The speed of innovation in the field of direct/online banking is extreme. The same holds true for the communication department. The speed of communication and the number of channels are increasing every year. It was obvious that we had to collaborate more efficiently and effectively. We are a small team. Therefore, flexibility in terms of tasks and topics is very important for us. So, I would say it was initially both a top-down initiated process and a bottom-up process.

What were your biggest challenges along the way?

The process towards more agility has its ups and downs. While in the beginning people are motivated and excited, this usually declines when they understand that agility has its downsides, too.

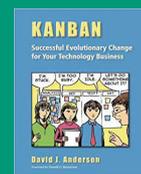
Working with Kanban and Scrum techniques means that employees have to have more self-initiative and have to work more transparently and collaboratively. Not everyone is cut out for that. Some people need more convincing than others. Here, executives need patience but should stay determined about their course. Most problems work themselves out when establishing a culture of feedback, failure tolerance, and trust.

What tips can you give your colleagues that have just started this journey?

First of all, just do it! It is easier when you start small. Although ‘islands of agility’ have their drawbacks, too, for us it worked. Communication has the general advantage that it is often relatively independent from other functions and units. Important is that your people understand your goal and share your sense of urgency. You have to explain why this approach is superior to others.

 **FURTHER READINGS**

Anderson, D. (2010). Kanban: Successful evolutionary change for your technology business. Seattle, WA: Blue Hole Press.
Kanbanize (2018). Kanban explained for beginners. <https://kanbanize.com/kanban-resources/getting-started/what-is-kanban/>.



Scrum

Scrum is a tool originally used in software development as a creative way to get products or results both effectively and efficiently. It emphasizes creative and adaptive teamwork to solve complex problems and reveals where a team performs well and where more coordination is needed. The method is designed for teams of three to nine members. Work packages are created that can be completed within timeboxed iterations, called sprints (30 days or less, most commonly two weeks). The daily progress is tracked and re-planned in daily 15-minute stand-up meetings, called scrums.

There are always two pre-defined roles in the team:

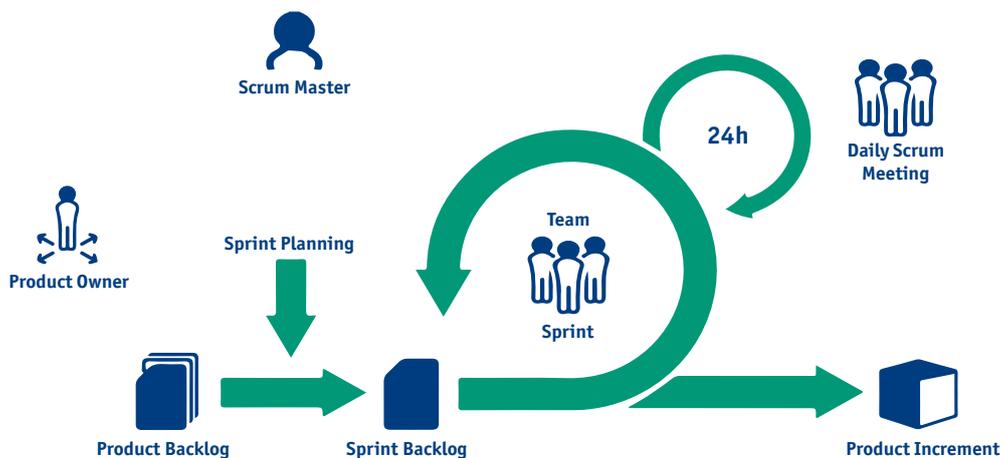
1 The **Product Owner** prepares a prioritized list of tasks – the product or sprint backlog – and is responsible for the success of the project. A team takes over the tasks from the backlog during the sprint planning and completes them in a pre-defined period (sprint). In the end, the results are presented to the customer in a sprint review. Within a sprint, a team creates real results rather than rough sketches. In

the process the team is completely free and decides on its own how to proceed.

2 The **Scrum Master** makes sure that the team can work without interruption. He/she ensures that everyone understands and follows the process.

(Maximini, 2015; Schwaber & Sutherland, 2017; Takeuchi & Nonaka, 1986; Van Ruler, 2014)

Scrum process



A typical Scrum process (Source: Gollmer, 2018)



FURTHER READINGS

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The scrum culture. Introducing agile
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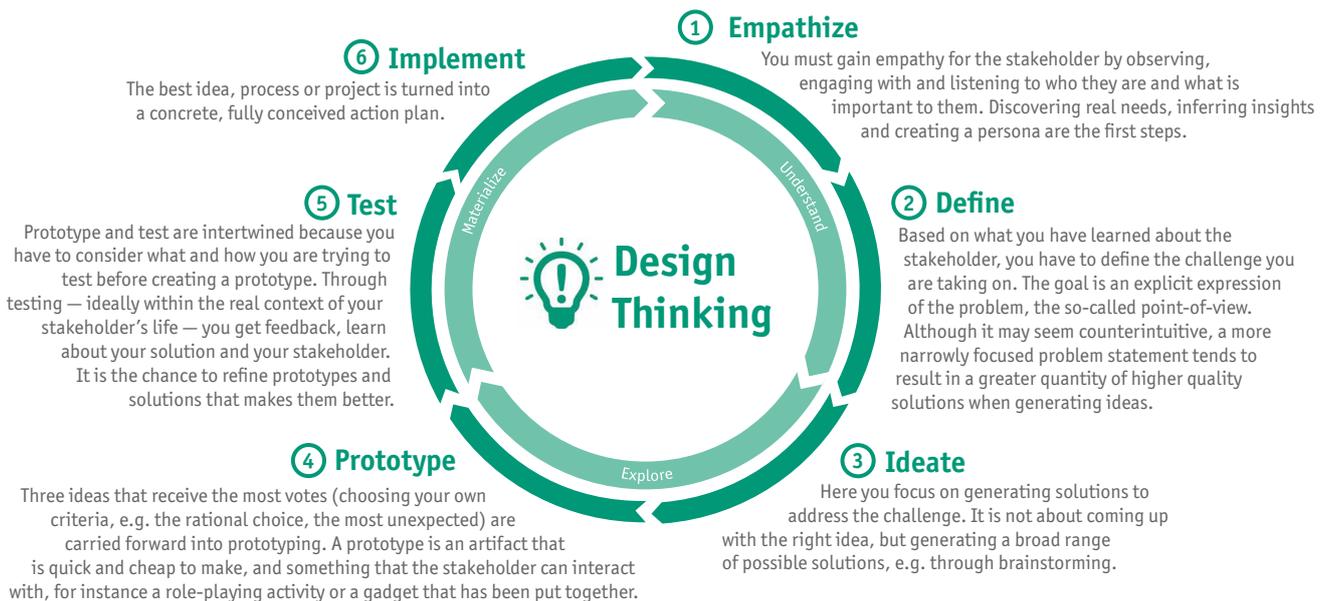
Design Thinking

Design Thinking is an agile tool developed in the 1990s in Silicon Valley. What was originally intended as a method to create innovative products and services, has advanced to a comprehensive methodology of creative teamwork that brings unexpected solutions, changes in work culture, and improvements in team performance. Design Thinking focuses on both stakeholder and human needs, empathy, and values different points of view. It is about not looking for the perfect solution to a problem, but trying to quickly produce various innovative solutions by creating prototypes and then concentrating on the idea with the greatest potential. It is a method that fosters creative confidence and encourages thinking across boundaries. It is not only a process but also a mindset.

The success of Design Thinking is based on three key factors (HPI, 2018a; HPI, 2018b; Plattner et al., 2016):

- ▶ **People:** The team is formed in a multi-disciplinary way that fosters ideas that go beyond disciplinary borders. Diversity is one of the key principles to overcome the internal barriers of silo-thinking.
- ▶ **Place:** Creative workspaces invite the team to visualize their thoughts and share results. A free and flexible working environment enhances idea generation. Such a workspace should contain, for example, whiteboards, movable furniture, and material for prototyping like LEGO bricks. The room has to be adapted to the needs of each project.
- ▶ **Process:** The process is divided into five iterative loops (see graphic below) and visualized as a circle, but the steps can be performed in various orders. A culture open to errors and iterations are central to Design Thinking. Iterations occur during the whole process multiple times, but also on a smaller scale within each of the individual steps.

Design Thinking process



Own figure based on Knüpfer, 2018

FURTHER READINGS

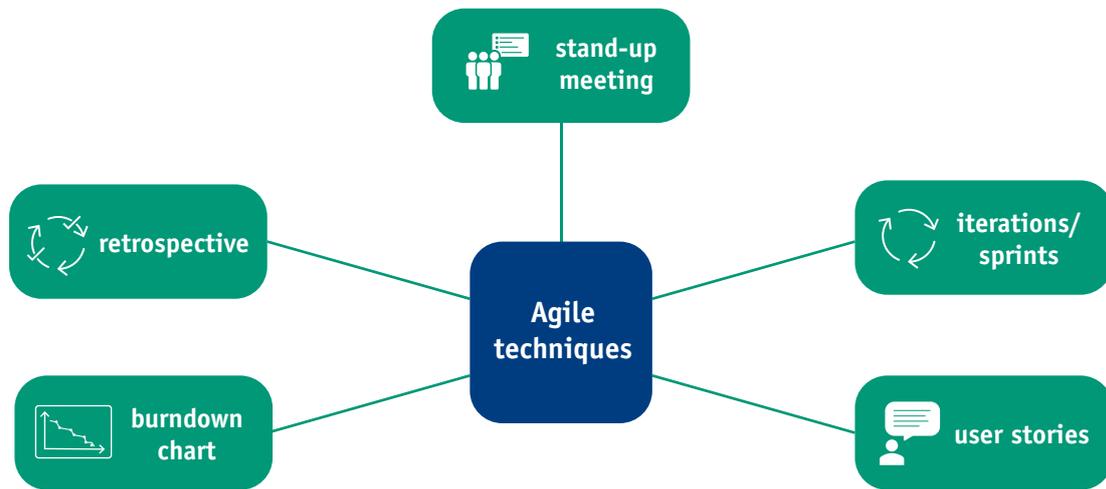
Plattner, H., Meinel, C., & Leifer, L. (Eds.) (2018). Design thinking research: Making distinctions: collaboration versus cooperation. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Website "openHPI" of the Hasso Plattner Institute (www.open.hpi.de) offering free online classes and tutorials on IT and Design Thinking topics.



Common agile techniques

Even without fully implementing agile tools, communication departments can introduce aspects such as stand-up meetings or retrospectives to help improve project management. The most commonly used agile techniques are briefly introduced here:



- ▶ **Burndown charts** visualize and monitor the progress of work. It is a graphical representation of work left to do versus time. The horizontal axis of the burndown chart shows the time (for example in days) and the vertical axis shows the amount of work remaining (backlog). It helps to clearly see what is happening and how progress is being made. This is why it can be applied to any project containing measurable progress over time.
- ▶ The aim of **retrospectives** is to learn from the past and thus improve processes. All team members evaluate what went well and what did not. Retrospectives make an important contribution to the continuous improvement of the process including finding the most efficient way to deploy and improve agile practices.
- ▶ In a **stand-up meeting** all team members report what they have done the day before, where problems might have occurred and what they have planned for the current day. A stand-up meeting should not last more than 15 minutes. The purpose is to keep all team members aware of the project status and give an overall picture of the project.
- ▶ An **iteration or sprint** is a fixed period of time within which a team or person works towards the completion of a goal. At the beginning of each iteration the team holds a planning meeting to break down each of the goals scheduled for the sprint into specific tasks. After the sprint, work should stop and the results and team process are reviewed for better results in the next iteration. Usually, a project consists of a sequence of iterations and one iteration lasts from one day to four weeks.
- ▶ A **user story** is a brief statement that identifies the stakeholder and their needs or goals. The user story is written in everyday language and from the stakeholder's point of view. There is usually one user story per person (stakeholder). It outlines the role, the action or capability, and the benefit of the project to the user. In comparison to case studies, user stories are short-lived and only survive one iteration while case studies are more extensive and long-lasting.

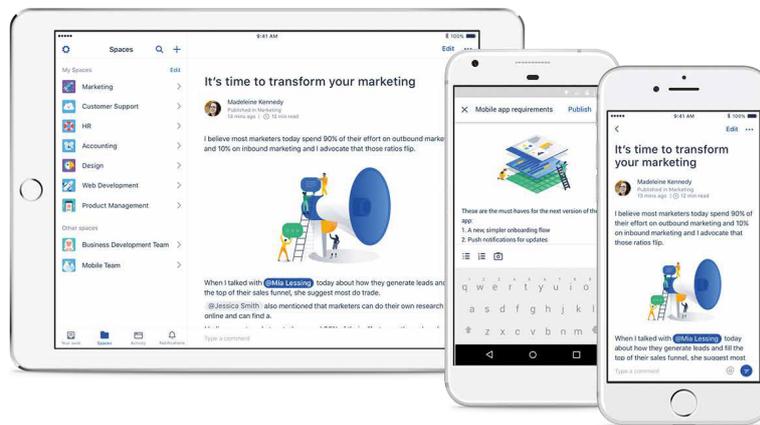
(Dinwiddie, 2009; Hanschke, 2017; Van Ruler, 2015)

Technologies supporting agility

Agile tools can be supported by technology. Software such as Jira, VersionOne, or Jam support agile practices and offer digital project management solutions. With the growing importance of cross-functional teamwork, collaboration software such as Skype for Business or Sharepoint is used more frequently, too. With the emphasis on transparency and knowledge sharing, many companies use their social intranet or wikis to share agile expertise and experiences. Some have groups that focus on exchanging experiences of working with agile tools. Others use

intranet facilities to provide information and material about agile practices.

An upcoming challenge mentioned by a couple of companies in our sample is the integration of digital project management and digital human resource management. Agile structures and processes need to be better covered and appreciated by human relations. For example, salaries and incentives need to be adopted flexibly to the current role and responsibility of the employee.



Confluence by Atlassian is a popular content collaboration software. (Picture: <https://de.atlassian.com/mobile>)

i AT A GLANCE

- Most communication executives are well aware of the challenges and opportunities that agility presents and rethink their own way of working.
- Communications can play a triple role in enhancing the agile transformation of an organization: First, by communicating about agility; second, by transforming its own departmental structures and processes; and third, by supporting and enabling other departments.
- For communication departments to become more agile, six factors need to be aligned: structures & processes, people & culture, and tools & technology.
- The most complex and challenging steps are to establish new structures, create flatter hierarchies and enhance collaboration in teams. Some communication departments have started to create 'islands of agility', while others pursue more fundamental transformations. However, the majority is still cautious about implementing radical changes and tearing down hierarchies.
- A new corporate culture and a new mind-set among staff are the two most critical success factors. Without the commitment and openness of leaders and employees, agility will never come to life. The new corporate culture should be based on empowerment, collaboration and shared responsibility. It also requires a new openness for failure. Executives need new leadership skills with the ability to coach, enable and empower employees and advise other business or corporate units.
- Many agile tools such as Scrum or Kanban, or elements of agile techniques, can be implemented fairly easily and usually operate on a trial-and-error basis. Technologies, such as digital project management software or knowledge management platforms, support the move towards working in a more agile manner.

📖 FURTHER READINGS

Hanschke, I. (Eds.) (2017). Agile in der Unternehmenspraxis. Fallstricke erkennen und vermeiden, Potenziale heben. Wiesbaden, Germany: Springer Vieweg.

