

COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS

REDESIGNING COMMUNICATIONS

Five steps toward an agile
communications department



ACADEMIC SOCIETY
FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

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EDITORIAL

Over the past few years, we have witnessed a growing number of change programs focusing on making communication departments more flexible and adaptive. The Academic Society has accompanied this development with a three-year research project (2017-2020) “Corporate communications in agile organizations” conducted by the Universities of Leipzig, Münster, and Vienna. The project explored different aspects of agility, including internal restructuring and agile processes, people development and cultural change, strategic content management and the power of newsrooms, as well as the role of consultancies and service providers for an agile transformation. The results have been published in previous issues of the Communication Insights series (#5 – 7).

» Five steps toward agility – what sounds like the advertisement for a fitness studio is in fact one of the most challenging topics communication managers face today. «

We found, however, that many communication managers are still struggling with implementing agility, wondering which steps to take to make their team more agile. Therefore, we conceptualized this publication, Communication Insights #8, around five major steps needed to transform a communication department in order to make it more agile. Our findings are based on almost 100 interviews with employees from 38 companies, including in-depth case studies in ten of them. The experience of leading corporate communication teams provided us with valuable insights on how to approach this challenge. Many thanks go to all practitioners that devoted time and energy to the interviews and case studies, and to Karen Berger for her essential support for this comprehensive project.

The importance of agility has been illustrated during the Covid-19 crisis, although the focus has shifted elsewhere in many communication departments at first glance. Departments that underwent agile transformation before were able to better cope with the new situation. Self-organizing teams can respond more quickly to changes. A new leadership style building on trust and encouragement proved to be helpful in times of virtual collaboration. Although other challenges will come to the fore now, the essential elements of agility will probably stay with us for a long time.

We hope you will benefit from reading this issue of Communication Insights.

Dr. Ansgar Zerfass

Professor and Chair of Strategic Communication,
Leipzig University

ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

When we started the research project “Corporate communications in agile organizations” in 2017, agility was an up and coming topic, although some believed that we were already past the hype peak. However, from what we have seen over the course of this research project, it is quite the contrary. Agility has evolved into a diffuse yet omnipresent management concept that will probably occupy us for years to come.

Our research project gave us deep insights into many companies and their diverse strategies for dealing with the need to become more agile. Overall, we interviewed about a hundred practitioners from all parts of the organization and also external consultants and communication agencies.

Methodology

The research project at Leipzig University was headed by Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass and Dr. Lisa Dühring. It was carried out from July 2017 to July 2020 and used a multi-faceted approach:

- 1 Through a systematic **literature review** across various disciplines, we gained a comprehensive understanding of the concept of agility and its key dimensions. Several conceptual frameworks for agility were analyzed and the relevant aspects for communication management were synthesized.
- 2 **Thirty-eight interviews** were conducted with chief communication officers and senior communication managers from multinational companies that provided insight into the impact of agility on corporations and their communication departments today. The companies came from diverse industries (e.g., manufacturing, automotive, insurance, finance, health-care, pharma) and were grouped into three categories: medium-sized companies (< €5 billion annual revenue), large-sized companies (€5-20 billion annual revenue) and very large-sized companies (> €20 billion annual revenue). Thirteen of the interviewees work for medium companies, nine for large companies, and sixteen for very large companies.

Companies that participated in the first survey



38 interviews were conducted with with chief communication officers and senior communication managers from multinational companies to gain insights into the impact of agility on their company.

3 **Ten case studies** have been conducted in selected companies that have different levels of experience with agility. The case studies included on-site research stays within the companies with a minimum length of two days and a maximum length of two weeks. Overall, 92 interviews were conducted, each of which lasted approximately an hour with a diverse range of personnel, including CCOs,

board members, heads of strategy, senior communication executives, junior communication staff, human resource managers, agile coaches, and other employees related to the agile transformation. In addition to the interviews, we also gathered insights during informal conversations and by attending several workshops and meetings. We also analyzed the documents made available to us.

Companies that were selected as case studies



Ten companies with experience in agile working were selected as case studies and were investigated more profoundly.

4 Finally, the compiled knowledge was bundled to describe a **five-step change process** that visualizes the most important steps of the agile transformation.

Overall findings

We found that many companies and communication departments resort to cherry-picking when it comes to agility. They try out or implement selected aspects of agility. The majority experiments with agile tools and technologies: Kanban Boards; software tools such as Jira, Confluence and others; or creates islands of agility in certain project teams that work according to Scrum, for instance. It is reasonable and pragmatic to proceed like this. But this approach can create a number of problems as well. Many attempts of ‘trying

out’ agility fail because it needs more than a few Post-its stuck regularly on a board. Most of all – and first of all – agility needs a change in culture. Without a fundamental reorientation of the company or at least the communications department as a whole about how to work together and how leadership is understood, all other steps will probably fail.

The five-step process presented here is designed for each step to build upon the previous one, meaning, for instance, that before you change your organizational structures, you would be well advised to consider your corporate culture and work processes first. Still, before engaging in an agile transformation, you should bear in mind each of the steps in order to be aware of its implications beforehand.

THE FIVE-STEP PROCESS TO CREATE AN AGILE COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT

REDESIGNING ASPECTS OF CULTURE, WORK, STRUCTURE, PEOPLE, AND EVALUATION

1 CULTURE

Prepare for agility

Create physical work environments that enhance creativity and collaboration.
Establish a work culture that focuses on trust, empowerment, and self-management.
Offer employee agreements that allow for flexibility and self-care.

2 WORK

Work in an agile project organization

Organize work in a way so that employees can respond fast and proactively.
Give them space to work efficiently, within a great team.
Use agile methods and tools when necessary.

3 STRUCTURE

Reorganize your communications department

Find the right set-up for your communications team that overcomes traditional silos and supports collaboration.
Overcome traditional power zones and enable lateral leadership.
Let your structures remain flexible and adaptive.

4 PEOPLE

Establish a new approach to people management

Allow for job rotation and role switches.
Redesign your competency management and training to cater to the needs of your team.
Offer alternative career paths.

5 EVALUATION

Redesign your target and performance management

Align agile work and structures with a responsive target management.
Ensure that your performance management reflects on individual and team performance.
Evaluate your agile transformation in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

STEP 1:
CULTURE

STEP 2:
WORK

STEP 3:
STRUCTURE

STEP 4:
PEOPLE

STEP 5:
EVALUATION

STEP 1: CULTURE

LAYING THE GROUND FOR AN AGILE TRANSFORMATION WITH AN AGILE CULTURE AND A NEW LEADERSHIP APPROACH

It goes without saying that an agile transformation cannot be achieved without a fundamental change in corporate culture. The dimensions and elements of a cultural change process, however, are interpreted rather differently by companies. STEP 1 presents diverse elements of culture with regard to agility and also points towards the importance of a different leadership approach. Two case studies – OTTO Group and ING – are presented that emphasize different aspects that need to be considered when engaging in a cultural change process: first, the involvement of the whole company, especially the board of executives, and, second, the importance of internal communication that really engages with employees.

A new corporate culture for agile organizations

Agile organizations need a different corporate culture than more hierarchical and bureaucratic ones. Various studies by management consultancies have shown that corporate culture is the biggest challenge when it comes to agility (VersionOne, 2017; De Smet, 2018a; CGI, 2016). It is not without reason that many companies have launched major cultural change initiatives in recent years against the backdrop of the digital transformation (Rigby et al., 2020; Hamel & Zanini, 2018; Birken et al., 2019).

There is no clear definition of what exactly an agile corporate culture looks like. However, some core components can be found in the literature (Kühl, 2017; Baltés & Freyt, 2017), such as:

- ▶ a focus on collaboration and teamwork
- ▶ flatter hierarchies and democratic participation of employees in decision-making processes
- ▶ a focus on self-management and empowerment
- ▶ the associated relinquishment of control by managers
- ▶ an openness to trial and error and
- ▶ a continuous willingness to learn.

The cultural change initiated in the companies is intended to promote creativity and innovation.



Three dimensions of agile culture

Implementing a different corporate culture is, of course, easier said than done. Every company that participated in our research project did attempt to achieve some kind of cultural change in one way or another. However, the interpretation of what this implies differs from company to company.

Some aspects of corporate culture focus more on physical environments, others more on psychological aspects. Overall, we identified three main dimensions of corporate culture:

- 1 **Physical work environments** that seek to enhance creativity and collaboration, such as open office spaces with lounge areas, specially designed meeting areas, fun components such as table soccer, etc.
- 2 A **work culture** that focuses on the empowerment of employees, lateral leadership, democratic forms of decision-making, personal fulfillment, and purpose.
- 3 **Employee agreements** that focus on the well-being of employees, such as flexible working hours, home office, sabbaticals, etc.

The first aspect of **physical work environments** originates in the Silicon Valley start-up culture, which believes that creativity, productivity, and innovation need a certain kind of work environment. Many firms introduced open office spaces that are meant to enhance collaboration but also allow employees to relax, unwind, and have fun.

This physical element of culture change is supported by a different **work culture**, characterized by mutual respect, collaboration, self-fulfillment, and empowerment. Recently, we have seen a revival of the *New Work approach* introduced by the philosopher Frithjof Bergmann in the 1980s (Bergmann, 2019; Hofmann et al., 2019). Firms should become environments that allow employees to be humans, cherish creativity, allow for mistakes, and create an atmosphere of continuous individual and collective growth. New Work is also related to the changing expectations of employees regarding participation, autonomy, and sense-making through work. It is argued that as a result of this sort of environment, work will become a stimulating and fun place to be, leading to greater productivity and lower turnover costs (Bakke, 2005).

Third, there are the more **formal elements of culture**, allowing for employees to work more flexible in terms of place and time. We see a rising degree of virtualization of work appliances, connecting people at different spaces and from different teams. Multiple software tools allow for more flexible workplaces and working hours.

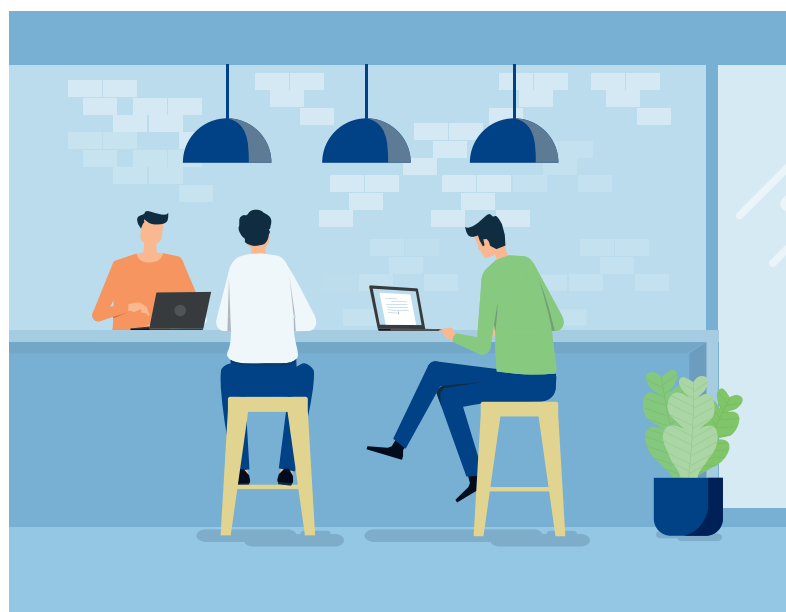
Agile culture requires a new approach to leadership

Despite the importance of these three elements, we found that the most important success factor for a cultural change was the **support of the (top) management**. In order for culture change to become more than some abstract concepts in a fancy brochure, employees have to perceive that change is real and their superiors should lead by example. In fact, implementing a new corporate culture is more a leadership question than an internal change program.

As discussed in previous Communication Insights #5 to #7 (see p. 40), the agile transformation requires a new approach to leadership – one that is less anchored in hierarchies or departmental power structures. Instead, a more servant leadership style is necessary. Managers should take on the **role of coaches and enablers** who give their employees the greatest possible freedom but are always available as consultants (De Smet, 2018b; Rutz, 2017; Lawler & Worley, 2015).

Hierarchies will not be completely abolished but will have to be lived differently. Clearly defining new leadership roles and having them filled by capable employees is a major challenge. Open, less regulated and prescribed structures and reporting channels demand a high degree of personal responsibility and self-management. Not every employee succeeds in this without further ado which is not necessarily a question of age but also of personality (Peterson & Mannix, 2003; Schloegel et al., 2018).

Agility is often wrongly interpreted as the abolishment of leadership. In fact, the contrary is the more accurate view. Never is leadership as essential as it is in phases of fundamental upheaval. It is not entirely coincidental that discussions about **corporate purpose and purpose-driven leadership** are experiencing a revival at the moment. The uncertainties brought about by the digital transformation make employees look for leadership and guidance. However, what is required is not micromanagement at the level of individual projects but rather the provision of a so-called north star – the overall goal and aim of the transformation. Thus, culture and leadership are inseparable when it comes to the agile transformation.





otto group

CASE STUDY OTTO GROUP: CREATING A CORPORATE MOVEMENT

OTTO Group is a globally active group of retailers and retail-related service providers with around 52,560 employees and sales of EUR 13.4 billion in 2019. It is present in more than 30 countries in Europe, North and South America, and Asia with 30 major brands. With online sales of EUR 7.7 billion, OTTO Group is one of the world's largest online retailers.

The company has engaged very thoroughly in cultural change and meanwhile acts as a role model for many other companies.

Kulturwandel 4.0

OTTO Group started its cultural transformation process that it has named Kulturwandel 4.0 like most companies out of economic necessity. In the beginning, the process was driven by internal consultants analyzing the corporate strategy. When culture emerged as the fundamental roadblock standing in the way of overcoming the problems of digitalization, the management board and shareholders did not hesitate to make a change of corporate culture their number one priority. Right from the start, the change process was supported by the management board. Over time, this encouragement has led to the emergence of a myriad of bottom-up initiatives. There have been so many, in fact, that they speak of a "corporate movement" which seized the company and continues until today.

In the beginning, six overall topics/challenges were identified: power, speed, KPIs, empowerment, collaboration, and customers. As these topics are rather abstract, each member of the executive

board took over responsibility for one of them and created a team of committed people from all parts of the company.

To send a strong signal of change, in 2016, the executive board offered all employees to be on a first-name basis. The goal was to reduce hierarchical barriers and create a new sense of unity. Individual offices were abolished also at board level and the management became much more approachable by eating in the general canteen and dressing in jeans instead of a classic suit. These low-key changes were at least as important as what happened later on the big stage.

At the same time, a Kulturwandel 4.0-Team with around ten members was established. Their task was to drive the change program and motivate and enable others within the company to promote cultural change in their respective local team or unit. By now, small cultural change teams exist in over 20 subsidiaries and they help to find out what their organization needs and create tangible and sustainable changes in their unit.



» There were three important prerequisites that helped us through the early stages of the process until today: First, the full and active support of the shareholders and the cohesion of the board. Second, we involved hardly any external consultants but managed the process with the help of many internal volunteers from all parts of the holding, many of whom we completely released from their other tasks. Third, we never understood the cultural change as a project with a certain endpoint but as an open, ongoing process. «

Thomas Voigt, Chief Communication Officer of OTTO Group

CULTURE CHANGE THESES

- 1 Not machines but people generate transformation.
- 2 There is not the one and only corporate culture.
- 3 No evolution without revolution.
- 4 Corporate culture needs the ,why'.
- 5 Only practiced loss of control releases potential.
- 6 Culture is defined by the quality of relationships.

Measures to promote cultural change

The OTTO Group developed a multitude of measures, tools, and events to communicate and promote the cultural change program. Here are some of them:

- ▶ A **Culture Change 4.0** platform was set up on the intranet that offers more than 450 tools, ideas, and methods, also known as ,workhacks' which can be published by every employee of the OTTO Group.
- ▶ OTTO Group also staged a number of events in order to convey the spirit of change. One of them was the **#MUT-Festival** (Mut being the German word for "courage") – a corporate event open to all employees with the aim of propagating the new approach toward work. The company wanted to stress the importance of courage and encourage its employees to seize the opportunities offered by digitization. The festival offered multiple parallel sessions where people could discuss, share tools, or methods, learn new skills, or tell others about incidents at work that required courage.



Petra Scharner-Wolff, Member of the Executive Board and Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Controlling, Human Resources at OTTO Group was the patron of the #MUT-Festival.

- ▶ OTTO Group decided to spread these ideas beyond its corporate borders and host the **Culture Development Experience (CDx) BarCamp** – a platform where employees from many different companies meet to exchange insights and experiences with culture change, new work, and agility. The BarCamp itself is a good expression of what the new culture is about: open up, learn from each other, and share ideas, successes, and failures alike.

From a change program to a corporate movement

Reflecting on the scope the change process has taken so far, Svenja Reinecke, Communication and Transparency Manager within the Kulturwandel 4.0 team, said: *“Until today the Otto Group achieved nothing short of a corporate movement. Something that goes way beyond the usual administered change programs we have seen in the past. A movement that has its own festivals, hard-core fans, social media channels, etc. A movement that started at some point somewhere but by now goes way beyond its initially intended scope. We are really proud of what we achieved together.”*

Still, the culture change at OTTO Group also followed and still follows the lead of economic necessity. Alexander Birken, CEO of the Otto Group, stressed: *“We do not do cultural change in order for people to feel good but in order to survive.”* This is probably the level of urgency and commitment a company has to invest in order for its change program to succeed.

Four years after the start of the change process, the executive board members still reserve one day a month to talk among themselves about the current state of the cultural change program and any necessary adjustments.



READING RECOMMENDATION:

To better understand the scope of the cultural change program at OTTO Group, anyone interested can follow their blog (German only):

www.ottogroupunterwegs.com/blog



CASE STUDY ING: CULTURAL CHANGE THROUGH OPEN AND TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION

ING Germany is a subsidiary of ING Group headquartered in the Netherlands. The bank achieved a pretax profit of EUR 1.322 billion in 2019 and has 4,790 employees serving over 9 million customers. The core business areas are savings deposits, mortgage lending, securities business, consumer loans, and current accounts for private customers.

The following case study will give an impression of the importance of internal communications for the cultural transformation experienced by ING's German subsidiary.

About the agile transformation of ING Germany

The agile transformation program 'One agile way of working' initially started at ING in the Netherlands in June 2015. There was no particular financial imperative to do so, since the company was performing well. Customer behavior and expectations, however, were rapidly changing in response to new digital distribution channels. Thus, the bank wanted its work to be more customer-centric and adjust more flexibly to changing customer needs. After the transformation in the home market was a success, the group decided in 2017 to roll out the "One agile way of working" program internationally. In 2018, the German subsidiary in Frankfurt started its own agile transformation. The challenge was to adopt the model from the Netherlands to the business model and internal structures in Germany.

Structural reorganization backed up by a cultural change program

The change program of ING Germany included both a **structural reorganization** of the whole organization based on agile principles (disintegration of former departments, organization in centers of expertise, squads, circles, and tribes) as well as a cultural change program. The dominant concept behind the structural change was to achieve an 'end-to-end principle,' meaning that employees work in multidisciplinary teams (squads or tribes) that comprise a mix of specialists – e.g. from marketing, sales, user-experience designers, data analysts, and IT engineers – all focused on solving a certain problem and offering a better solution for the client.

The **cultural change program** was designed to support this process. It revolves around the establishment of an agile mindset and agile principles and focuses on the empowerment of employees, their self-efficiency, collaboration, assumption of responsibility, trust, and continuous learning and improvement.

Implementing the change program with an 'Agile Adventure' campaign

The change process was driven by a squad (project team) that was composed of a diverse range of people from different areas of the organization: marketing, HR, strategy, communications and several business units. The change program itself was implemented through a large-scale internal 'Agile Adventure' campaign that was designed to communicate the change in a rather playful way via a jungle adventure theme and gamification elements. The two essential modes were 'Way of Working'-training sessions for selected leadership personnel and 'Agile Xperience'-workshops open to every employee. These were organized and accompanied by local transformation teams and internal agile coaches. Here employees learned about the new mindset and values but also about agile methods such as Scrum, Kanban, or PACE.

Changing the culture of communication

One of the crucial success factors was changing the **culture of communication**. It is important to explain the necessity of a structural reorganization, to provide roadmaps, to cultivate positive images, and to stimulate support.

In a phase of transition, uncertainty is extremely high and can only be countered by constant, transparent communication. First and foremost, employees must **understand the purpose of the transformation** and how it fits the strategy. Laura Wirtz leads the Center of Expertise Strategy & Business Development at ING Germany and is responsible for the change process. Looking back, she states: "What we needed to communicate again and again, is 'Why are we doing this? What is the goal and how does it contribute to our strategy?'"

The 'Agile Adventure' campaign at ING Germany



» The training sessions and workshops were extremely effective in reducing uncertainty and incomprehension among the employees. We wanted to communicate the agile change program in a playful way, framing it as a kind of adventure. However, employees can find it childish and condescending, and this can lead to the rejection of the change process or to the situation where it is not taken seriously. We started with a very playful approach but later aimed for a more serious note. «

Stefanie Nachtigall, Expert Internal Communication, ING Germany

Many communication measures were designed, organized, and conducted by the **transformation squad**. This is a pattern we observed in a couple of other organizations, too. The communication prior to and during the change process is not necessarily the sole responsibility of the communication department. Often-times special transformation units are established that take over different communication tasks, too. The ING squad, for example, also included former communication personnel. That came as no surprise considering the importance of communication in the change process.

ING also decided against a top-down, matter-of-fact communication, but opted for an **iterative, pathway-accompanying communication**. According to the principle of 'minimal viable product', the current state of knowledge and work was shared, which might have to be revised later. However, the strategy of showing small, quick wins paid off.

Furthermore, ING deliberately **dispensed with the usual communication cascade**. No selected part of the organization should have a big information advantage. Thus, the classic transformation bottleneck – middle management – were not supposed to act as gatekeepers. As reported from other companies in our project, middle management tend to be the 'quicksand' in which change initiatives can get stuck.

Successful communication formats

The approach of communicating from the board directly to every employee from the very beginning did pay off. Various communication formats, some of which were newly developed, were used:

- **Open-Door Sessions:** Here the board of directors was available at certain times each month to answer questions and receive suggestions from every employee – without an appointment or agenda.



» We wanted to encourage more ideas to see the light of day and not be nipped in the bud by seven levels of hierarchy. «

Laura Wirtz, Head of Strategy / Lead Center of Expertise Strategy & Business Development, ING Germany

- ▶ **Townhall meetings:** Employees were free to ask any number of critical questions. Instead of management intervening in advance, critical questions were deliberately allowed.
- ▶ **Social intranet:** Same was true for an unedited, uncensored social intranet, where employees could talk freely and voice their frustration and concerns.
- ▶ **Pizza sessions:** True to their name, pizza was served while members of the ING transformation team visited teams and departments from every business unit that was interested. During the sessions, representatives of the culture change team clarified open questions and ambiguities about the change program to a small circle of colleagues. This dialogue in small groups helped, on the one hand, to directly address concerns and fears, and, on the other hand, it also enabled the participants to directly practice agile exchange and communication culture.

- ▶ There were also plenty of **written and indirect communication formats** – staff magazine, brochures, give-aways – but the decisive success factors were definitely the personal, direct communication formats.

Just like in other companies, the change process at ING has led to an upgrading of internal communications. Sabine Vreden, Lead Internal Communication, says: *“One of the main tasks of the transformation squad was communicating the change program, informing and convincing employees of its merits. The squad always had direct access to the board. Thus, the board was very much involved in a couple of internal communication measures. I think that helped to achieve more awareness for the necessity – but also the complexity – of internal communication.”*

i CAVEAT

- **Take everyone on board:** The cultural change programs proclaimed by many organizations at the moment put a strong emphasis on business innovation and exploiting the promises of the digital transformation. It is, however, problematic when creativity and innovation are outsourced to so-called innovation hubs, swarms, think tanks, or creativity campuses. Many companies try to achieve a breakthrough by putting the best, most talented and most creative minds together in one place. Then the results of these ‘behind closed doors’ processes are delivered to the rest of the company and expected to be greeted with great enthusiasm. The result is that cultural change appears to be something the ‘head-quarter elite’ is concerned with – and spend a lot of money on – but nothing actually changes in the daily business of the majority of employees.
- **Appeal to white- and blue-collar workers alike:** In manufacturing companies and traditional industries, cultural change programs reach only a specific group of employees. This can lead to resistance and cynicism among those employees who see a huge gap between the ‘bright surface’ of their organization and the reality they experience at work. Many internal communication experts we have interviewed are caught between what they had to communicate and the realities many employees live in.



STEP 2: WORK

REORGANIZING WORK PROCESSES TO ALLOW FOR FLEXIBILITY AND INCREASED EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

When thinking about agile work, many people immediately think of reorganizing departments, dissolving old structures, and abolishing the hierarchy. However, working in a more agile way is possible in existing structures, too. STEP 2 will focus on what agile work can look like beyond organizational restructuring. Which methods are needed, which tools are used, and which problems can arise? Two case studies from SCHOTT and thyssenkrupp exemplify what agile project work looks like in communication teams and how they affect the way teams collaborate.

What does agile work mean?

First of all, it is important to define what we understand by the terms ‘agile work’ or ‘working agile’. Agile work can have different meanings. It is often defined as the organization of work according to agile methods, but that does not cover all of its scope. In our understanding, agile work means organizing work in such a way that employees can respond quickly and proactively to the immediate task at hand. It means giving them the space to work efficiently and effectively, within a team that comprises the right people with the skills and competencies needed to do the job.

Agile methods such as Scrum or Kanban can support this kind of work, but at the same time they can also make it more complex and difficult. Often, the methods do not fit the reality of the companies as we will see in the case study of SCHOTT. Thus, it is more important to establish processes that enable people or teams to work together as efficiently and smoothly as possible to achieve optimal results with as few resources as possible.

The reality of agile project management

In practice, agile work often means project-oriented work, which suggests that, on the one hand, an increasing number of tasks are declared as projects and are also processed in this way, according to the principle “find the best (wo)man for the job”. In the future, this will increasingly imply collaborating with colleagues from other departments such as HR, strategy or IT. Corporate communications, especially internal communication, is becoming more and more a cross-cutting function that interacts with many areas of the organization. Communicators, therefore, need to be open to new tasks, topics, and colleagues.

Agile work is often transverse to the actual organizational structure and this might lead to conflicts. It requires a high level of commitment and openness on the part of managers within corporate communications and in other departments to allow for new forms of work design and cooperation. This means, for example, that employees are released to agile projects and that areas of responsibility or even employee positions are shared or new ones are allocated. It also means that former procedures of project management in the organization must be overridden. It is obvious that it is not easy for employees to move seamlessly through two, three, or four organizational worlds and that agile project management demands new competencies and skills from them, which first have to be learned (see also STEP 4).

CASE STUDY SCHOTT: IMPLEMENTING AN AGILE PILOT PROJECT

SCHOTT
glass made of ideas

SCHOTT AG is an international technology group in the areas of specialty glass and glass-ceramics. The company's products can be found in many industries, including home appliances, pharma, electronics, optics, life sciences, automotive and aviation. The company reported sales of EUR 2.2 billion in the fiscal year 2018. Over 16,200 employees work for SCHOTT worldwide, 5,800 of them in Germany. SCHOTT has production sites and sales offices in 34 countries.

The case study is presented here because group-wide projects usually put agility and agile methods to the test: on the one hand, the advantages of agile methods can really come to bear here; on the other hand, the processes and structures of the entire organization naturally make a strict application of agile methods difficult. The experiences of SCHOTT provide valuable insights for other companies.

Collaboration as a main element of the new group strategy

SCHOTT is characterized by strong business units that are located far apart geographically and have historically developed strong individual identities. In 2017–18, SCHOTT started an overarching group strategy initiative with the aim to connect the entire group more strongly and to dissolve the silos of the business units in favor of a more market-oriented approach.

In order to make this strategy tangible for customers and users, a new website project was set up. Within the project, SCHOTT not only planned to redesign the corporate website but to define a completely new market-based structure, having a new content management system and infrastructure (cloud-based). The system-based functionalities of modern digital marketing (marketing

automation, personalization, e-mail marketing) should be used to drive sales opportunities. The so-called **Online Experience Platform (OnEx)** became a major company-wide project scheduled to take four years to complete and affecting a multitude of internal stakeholders. Due to the long-term nature and IT-related dimensions of the project, it was decided to set it up and manage it according to agile principles using the Scrum methodology. This also affected the working methods of the external agency that supported the project.

Group-wide projects of this scope put agility and agile methods to the test: on the one hand, the advantages of agile methods can really come to bear here; on the other hand, the processes and structures of the entire organization naturally make a strict application of agile methods difficult.



SCHOTT has had precisely this experience. Here, the IT, the Corporate Marketing and Communication departments were responsible for the implementation and management of the project. As the project included a completely new market presence and interaction with customers, the involvement of all business units was also essential.

Setting up a project with Scrum principles

Besides organizing the project according to Scrum principles, various other agile tools, such as Jira and Confluence, were used. To involve all relevant stakeholders from the business units, for example, various design-thinking workshops took place in the initial phase of the project. Experience has shown that it takes at least three to four months of preparation and training to enable a team to work with agile methods and tools. These preparations included Scrum training in order to become familiar with the method itself but also software training for working with Jira and Confluence. This needed time and energy and made the project management more complex in the beginning. In the long-term, however, the project benefited from this investment.

Besides training the people already on board, the agile project management approach also required new roles that had to be filled by new staff from the outside. Martin Mayer, for instance, came on board as Scrum Master. To fulfill this new role in the project, he complemented his experience in online marketing with a Scrum Master certificate. For the communication and marketing employees involved in the project, working according to Scrum was a new experience. Thinking and working in user stories and using new software tools had to be learned and practiced.

Before the start of the implementation phase, the entire project was broken down into streams, epics, user stories, and finally into 14-day internal sprints to plan all the steps and brief the implementation agency accordingly. It took about six months to set up all the requirements and write the first user stories. However, without these elaborate preparations, the project would have been doomed to failure. Scrum enabled clear scheduling, fixed processes, and efficient time management (time boxing). In the beginning, the project team met twice a week for a status update (daily). This ensured transparency in the initial months. *“Also essential were the so-called ‘Save Room’ sessions, which provided a framework for*



» My key learning as a manager was that an agile project requires a different team setup. It is critical to bring the right mixture of experienced employees and employees that know the company together to drive that project efficiently. My role as an executive also changed: less micromanagement within the project, but much more stakeholder management outside the project and toward the rest of the organization. I have to keep the project on long-term track, be in close contact with other areas, and be the one who quickly detects moods, vibes and opinions from the rest of the organization. Most important, it is my role to make strategic decisions in critical situations and to be responsible for the project with regard to overall budget, capacity, and resource planning. Trust is the most important value in this role. Also, working with an agile team is a lot of fun. «

Anja Dietze, Head of Brand Management and Digital Marketing, SCHOTT

retrospectively giving open and honest feedback as a team and for developing personally and as a group,” says Martin Meyer, project coordinator of the OnEx-Team.

Even though the rigid structure helped to get the project on track at the beginning, the experience and perspective of the team changed after a few months with the first hiccups happening. The team realized that it was extremely difficult to manage and to embed the project into the overall organization over a long period of time. It became important to change the project methodology and structure, if possible, without losing the basic idea of Scrum.

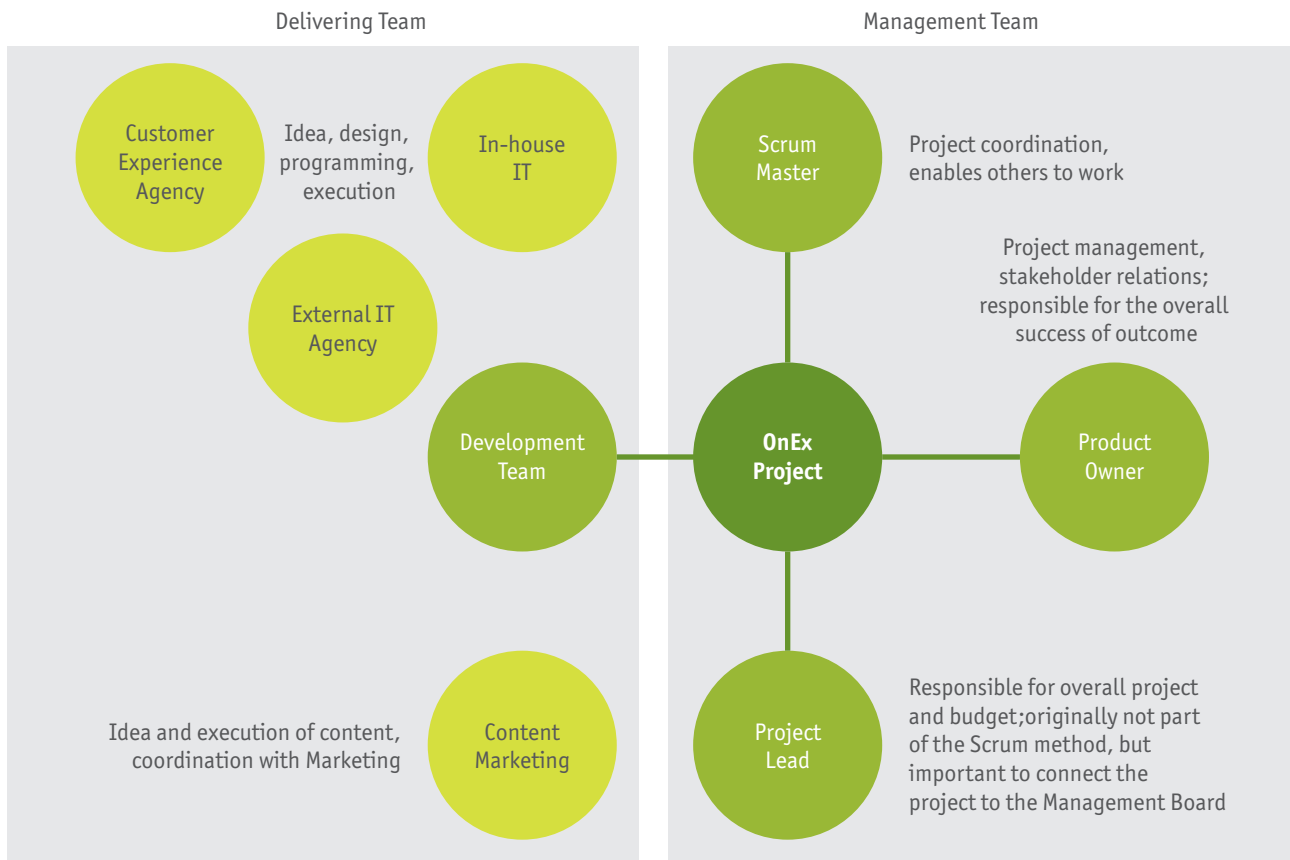
One essential lesson was: While Scrum helped to give the project a clear, calculable structure, it does not depict incalculable, informal, and interpersonal aspects that inevitably arise in a major corporation and in interaction with external service providers. These aspects can include a multitude of relevant

stakeholders (such as the management board, steering board, heads of business units, sales and product management) or unexpected events like problems with the chosen agency or major budget reductions. Examples of other sensitive points are internal reporting requirements and the time and capacity limitations of different internal stakeholders that need to be involved.

Linking Scrum to the rest of the organization

These points required an adjustment of the classical Scrum method. It was decided to introduce a complementary project management. This acted ,outside’ the Scrum-based project structure to take care of the overall stakeholder management and project presentation toward the board. An additional project lead position was introduced. This role is not defined by the classic Scrum idea. But it has proven to be necessary because it requires an experienced and recognized senior manager who anchors the project in the overall organization and also represents it to the board of executives.

The overall Online Experience Platform project structure and the roles involved





» *If I had to summarize the project in two sentences, it would be these: 1. According to the classical Scrum approach, we failed. 2. However, by using a modified approach – still based on the principles of Scrum – we have implemented an efficient and successful project.* «

*Martin Meyer, Scrum Master and Project Coordinator,
OnEx-Team, SCHOTT*

Anja Dietze, Head of Brand Management and Digital Marketing, took over this role. She reported that the OnEx project was and is extremely complex, but she and her colleagues were able to learn a lot as a team.

Outcome and learnings from the project

The project team and processes now have a functional and efficient setup, although they are not following the classic Scrum methodology. While the logic of the sprints still exists, pivotal decisions are now being made according to the waterfall principle. Retrospectives take place only every quarter instead of every two weeks. However, continuous learning and improvement are still a regular part of the process. Thus, the new setup can fulfill the requirement of the overall organization concerning project reporting and communication. Meanwhile, the involved IT agency still works 100 per cent according to Scrum.

SCHOTT's experience with a major project based on agile Scrum principles makes it quite clear that the methodology's rigidity cannot always be transferred to the reality and complexity of a major corporation.

Nevertheless, the method has helped to structure and manage the project, especially in the beginning. The clear allocation of roles and the introduction of software tools such as Jira and Confluence has helped to gain speed and self-management. This was extremely helpful in the recent COVID-19 situation when many team members from the marketing and communications team were already used to digital project management and the necessary tools.

In any case, the project led to a rethink of traditional structures and procedures and encouraged the team to try out new forms of cooperation, to consider a new interpretation of leadership, and to implement a more self-reliant kind of work. *"The agile project has also helped to overcome fears of working with agile tools and methods that were still present in the communications and marketing department,"* said Jonas Spitra, Manager Corporate & Innovation Communication. *"During this project, more and more 'islands of trying agility' have emerged."* These changes indicate that bigger agile projects can support change in organizations.



CASE STUDY THYSSENKRUPP: WORKING IN A PROJECT ORGANIZATION

thyssenkrupp AG is a diversified industrial group headquartered in Essen with subsidiaries in 78 countries worldwide and 162.000 employees. The group is organized in five business areas: components technology, elevator technology, industrial solutions, materials services, and steel Europe, some of which are managed separately as business units. The group comprises a total of 456 companies and 22 investments.

The communications department of thyssenkrupp was one of the first to adopt the principles of project organization and emphasized cross-departmental collaboration. They also established routines, procedures, and tools that are necessary to manage this transformation.

Setting-up a project-centric way of working

The communication department at thyssenkrupp started to organize itself more strongly into a project organization in 2016. Meanwhile, they gained a lot of experience and have become a proven example of how more agile, project-centric work can be achieved without dismantling departmental

structures. At the time of the interview in December 2018, the communication department was structured in five pillars and comprised almost 50 employees. In the meantime, the number of employees has been reduced to about 30 people and the department also faced a huge budget cut. The project organization and the corresponding gains in effectiveness and efficiency have helped to cushion this reduction.



» It is advisable to make big changes in stable times. Implementing new processes causes a lot of unrest in the team. This can go wrong if you do not have the capacity to absorb. «

Svenja Stasch, former project coordinator at thyssenkrupp



Interview with Svenja Stasch, thyssenkrupp

Dr. Lisa Dühning spoke with Svenja Stasch who was responsible for implementing the project organization back in 2016.

Svenja - you have been the main project coordinator in 2016 when your department started to implement a project-centric way of organizing work. Although the overall organizational design was not changed, the approach to work in projects was implemented. What was the initial impulse for tackling this?

The impulse came from Alexander Wilke, Head of Corporate Communications at the time, who has always been very open to trying out new things. I think he got the idea when visiting the communications team of Deutsche Telekom that had already started its agile transformation. Back then, we did not act out of economic necessity or the need to cut back on people. Still, our work processes at that time were not sustainable – way too time consuming, complex, and redundant. In order to change this, we decided to no longer think and act in terms of target groups but to be cross-functional in terms of content and channels which has made our work much more effective and efficient. I must say, we are glad that we started so early to implement a project structure, because we are now in a situation where we have to cut staff ourselves.

Is it advisable to make these changes in stable times?

Absolutely. Implementing new processes causes a lot of unrest in the team and that can go wrong if you do not have the capacity to absorb this.

Can you give a rough sketch of what your project organization looks like?

It is important to say that we have not touched our organizational chart, meaning that the departmental 'homes,' or the disciplinary management of our people, stayed in place. What we did was to define major parts of our work as projects. Not everything was redefined, of course, because there is a lot of day-to-day business,

but most of our work that is not tied to a special stakeholder relationship such as communication with the board or certain areas of media relations. Instead of thinking in departmental structures, we started thinking more in terms of roles and functions. In the beginning we defined about 40 projects – this number has not changed much. A project could be anything starting from a merger to a big industrial fair or the annual financial report.

How did you manage the projects and coordinate the staffing?

Well, that was a challenge in the beginning. First, we looked at each of our employees: How much day-to-day business do they have and how much capacity is left for projects? That differs from person to person. There are employees who work 100 percent on project business and others who are mainly absorbed in day-to-day business. For example, I am responsible for managing the new project organization as well as for budget planning and controlling. I only have about 30 percent capacity left to spend on other projects.

The main idea of the project organization is matching projects and people and achieving the best input-output scenario. Thus, we needed much more transparency than we had in the past. A simple Excel sheet helped us in the beginning to get an overview of all our projects, their aim and scope, the estimated amount of time and people spent on it, etc. We regularly reviewed every project and assessed the individual capacity of every team member. Therefore, we needed every staff member to assess how much time she or he spends on their projects and daily business and assess whether their workload adds up to around 100 percent or much more or less. In the latter case, we had to react and adopt.

Do employees apply for projects or are they assigned by their supervisor or project manager?

That depends. In the beginning, the idea was that principally anyone can apply for new projects, but we soon noticed that did not work. Large and strategically relevant projects in particular require certain skills and experience that not all employees possess. Thus, we now rely more on assignments, but applications are extremely welcome.

How did the team and the superiors react to the new project organization?

It first put them in shock. Although we did not actually change much formally, our employees were to a certain extent overwhelmed, intimidated and frightened. Likewise, the executive managers struggled to release employees to projects outside their division. There was also a huge lack of project management skills, which put the assigned project managers in a difficult situation. Many of them had not been in a leadership position before; now they were responsible for their own project management right from the beginning. They had to structure and staff the projects themselves, set the overall goals, define the timeline, the budget, the number and kind of staff they needed, etc. They were somewhat overwhelmed by these new tasks. Most of the employees were not able to assess his or her capacities in terms of how much time they were spending on their different tasks and projects.

What countermeasures did you take to create more acceptance?

In the first step, we started organizing a roundtable once a month. The roundtable has become an important outlet for discussing all sorts of questions but also for expressing concerns and sharing emotions. We wanted to avoid negative talk through the grapevine. Second, we invested in project management training for all project managers and later on for every team member. That helped considerably. Third, I first helped with the bureaucratic project management work such as structuring and setting up the projects, working out goals and milestones, setting budgets and a timetable. I then taught these skills to the project managers. When things were up and running and everyone was at least kind of familiar with the process, I went on parental leave for a year and when I came back things had settled down. I then started to optimize.

What were the aspects that needed improvement?

First of all, I took over a lot of bureaucratic work, especially the database management with the capacity calculation. I switched from Excel to Access. I had the regular exchange with the project managers every four (later on eight) weeks and the roundtable became very positive and productive. The review with the project managers now lasts ten minutes, whereas in the beginning it used to be an hour and a half. The exchange is very helpful for everyone. We have much fewer people doing overtime. The database creates a great deal of transparency with regard to the projects, but also with regard to each individual employee. The workload is more evenly spread and we know early on when critical project phases are coming up.

How much of your working time do you still spend on monitoring and project support?

Much less than in the beginning. Formats like the roundtable and the review have become very efficient. Besides that, I supervise almost 40 projects and that takes about 25 percent of my capacity per month. In the end, however, this is also a sensible investment of time for me because I am also responsible for budget planning and controlling. This means that these meetings always give me a good overview of where we stand.

Looking back at the rough star – would you say that it was worth the time and effort?

Absolutely!

Thank you very much for your insights!

i CAVEAT

- **Organizational reality refutes the ideal:** Agility is usually associated with empowerment and a coaching and trusting style of leadership. In addition, handing over responsibility from managers to staff members in prominent corporate projects is often seen as a prerequisite for an agile work environment. However, organizational reality often refutes the proclaimed ideal. Especially when things go south, the traditional chain of command is back in place and a scapegoat is sought out who can be blamed for giving too much freedom and not checking often enough on projects or processes.
- **Agility versus accountability:** It is important to stress that agility – empowering people to make decisions and relying on networks of interactions – does not mean that people are no longer accountable for results. In fact, one objective of agile work is to employ rigid goal-setting and establishing a timeline that is tracked constantly. Agile approaches, correctly applied, are supposed to make accountability more transparent. Individual and team goals and metrics should be shared for everyone to see. With the transparency comes shared responsibility. Thus, agility does not mean that accountability becomes more obscure or is transferred to lower hierarchical levels.

STEP 1:
CULTURE

STEP 2:
WORK

STEP 3:
STRUCTURE

STEP 4:
PEOPLE

STEP 5:
EVALUATION

STEP 3: STRUCTURE

FINDING THE RIGHT SETUP FOR YOUR COMMUNICATION TEAM

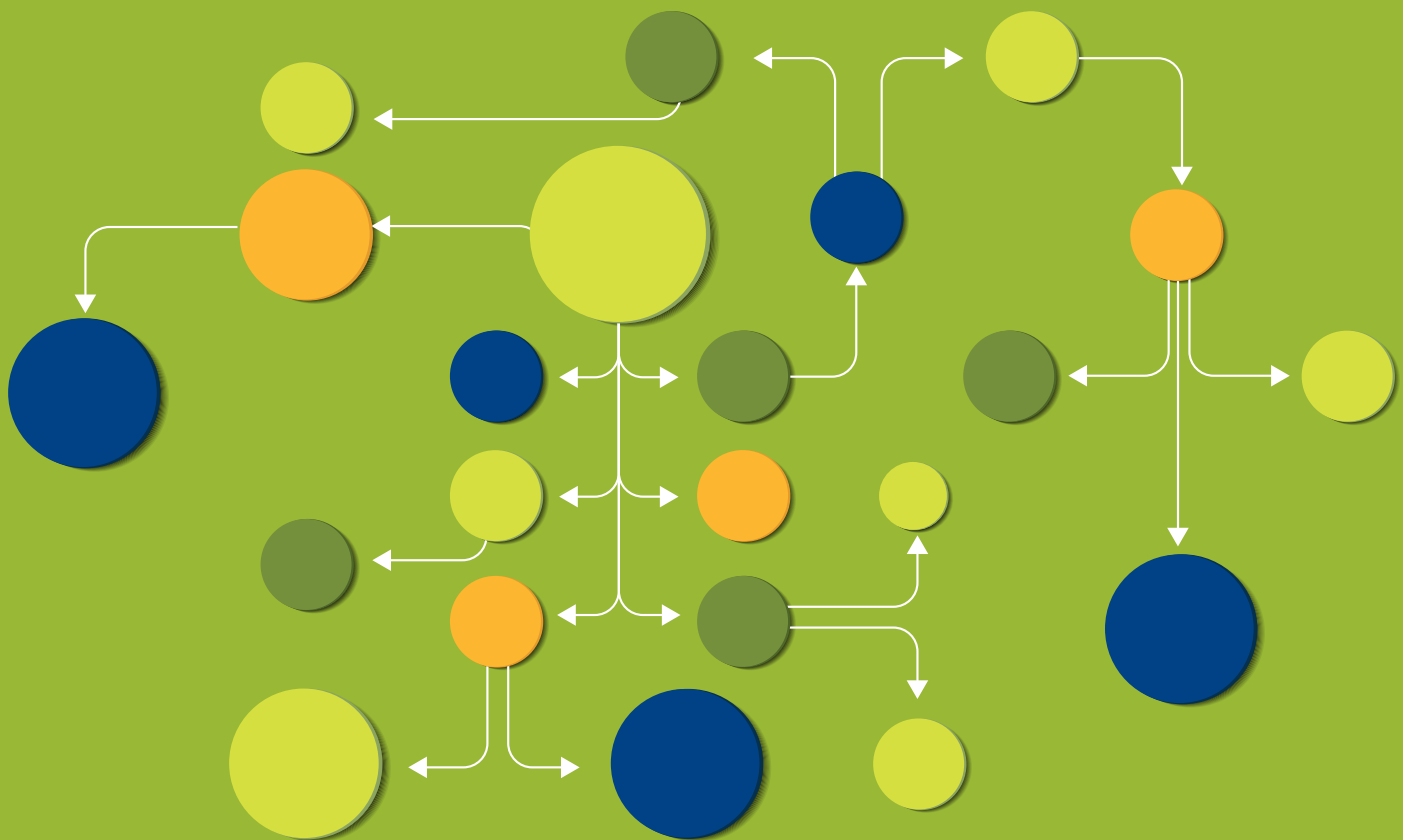
A structural reorganization is the most radical step communication departments can take on their journey toward more agility. The key question CCOs try to address with a reorganization is how to deploy the people at hand most efficiently and effectively, but also in the most flexible way. The increasingly connected and interdependent nature of content production and distribution requires people to collaborate across teams and subdivisions. STEP 3 focuses on where an agile restructuring is sensible and how such an agile setup can look like. The case study of Deutsche Telekom AG gives an example of a rather radical restructuring of the communication department.

Which areas in communication are suitable for agility?

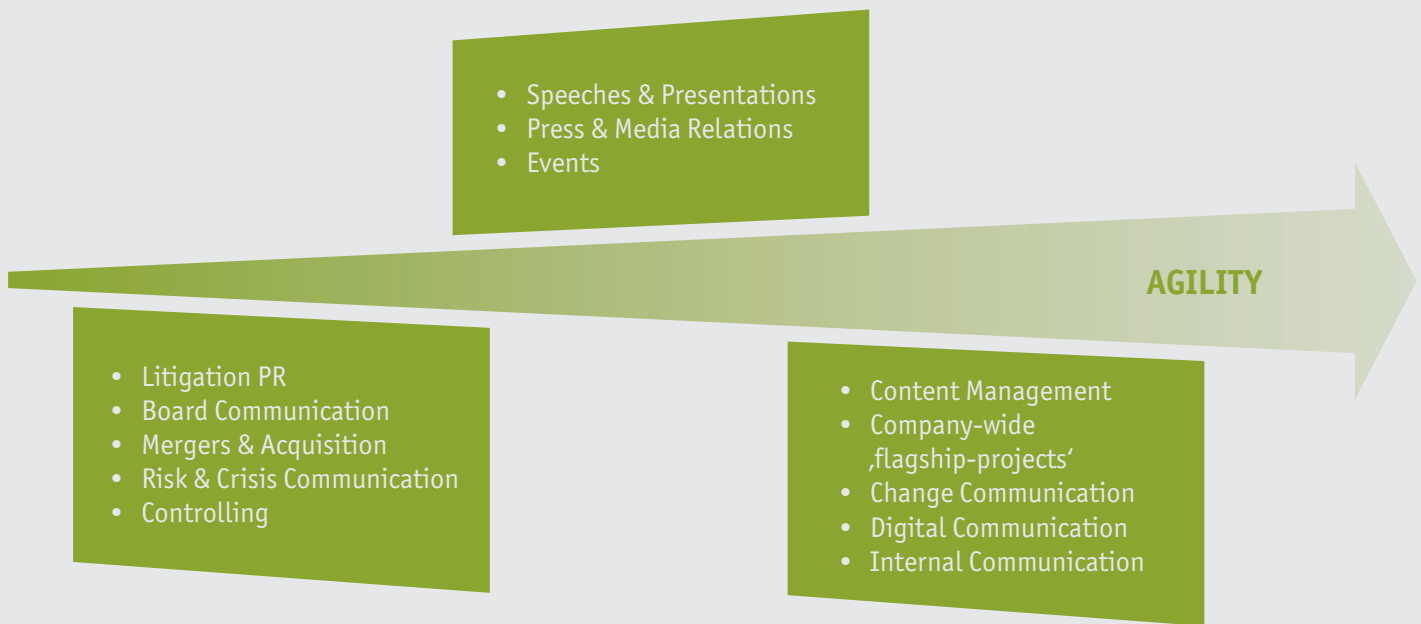
Agile structures make sense in many areas of today's communication departments as the modern media landscape requires cross-functional, fast, and flexible content production. Communication uses a multitude of channels to address internal and external stakeholders at the same time. To counter the information overload, it becomes more and more important to focus on strategic topics and projects

that were derived from the overall corporate strategy (see Communication Insights #6 , p. 40). Given the interconnectedness and interdependency of content production in the majority of communication departments, a more agile setup makes sense for many subdivisions.

However, there are also areas in corporate communication where agility is less sensible, if not counterproductive. These include tasks that are heavily regulated, in particular topics relevant to the share



Where agile structures make sense in communication departments



price or that could harm the company if communicated incorrectly. These must be dealt with by experts according to a prestructured and clearly defined process. There are also other tasks, such as mergers and acquisitions or crisis communications that are very sensitive and complex and require a high level of case or specialist knowledge. Also, tasks such as board communication or some aspects of press relations, require a permanent contact person. The graphic above provides an overview of which tasks are suitable for agile structures and processes and which are not.

Hybrid or matrix structures are dominating

At the moment, the majority of larger communication departments experimenting with agile work are still organized in hybrid or matrix structures with a growing number of agile project teams. However, while these hybrid structures can function as a stepping stone, they usually create a number of problems, such as an unclear chain of command or confusion about affiliation and accountability. Thus, it can be better to take a leap of faith and decide for a more complete restructuring. Until today, very few communication departments have radically altered their organizational setup. One of them

is Deutsche Telekom AG (see case study, p. 24). While many departments adopted a newsroom concept (see Communication Insights #6) or started to transfer a growing number of tasks into a project organization (see case study thyssenkrupp, p. 19), the majority refrains from radically intervening in departmental structures. And, true enough, the abolishment of subdepartments such as brand communications, internal communications, media relations, events, etc. is a huge step and can bring problems of its own (see caveat, p. 27). However, abandoning departmental silos and reducing hierarchy levels can help to truly and sustainably engage in agile cooperation. It can facilitate a mind shift among staff members and force them to abandon old affiliations and comfort zones.

The size of the department is irrelevant in this regard. Usually, smaller communication departments do not have a subdepartmental division anyway. What matters are the effects that are going to be achieved. Again, agility or structural reorganization is not an end in itself but caters to the need to make a department more efficient and effective. As said above, having a pool of people that can be employed rather flexibly is useful in some respects but can be harmful in others.



CASE STUDY DEUTSCHE TELEKOM: LESSONS LEARNED FROM WORKING SEVEN YEARS IN A PROJECT ORGANIZATION

Deutsche Telekom AG is one of the world's largest integrated telecommunications companies, with about 184 million mobile customers. The company provides fixed-network and broadband, mobile communications, internet, IPTV products and services for consumers, and information and communications technology (ICT) solutions. Deutsche Telekom is operating in more than 50 countries. With a staff of some 211,000 employees throughout the world, the company generated revenue of EUR 80.5 billion in the 2019 financial year.

The communications team of the Deutsche Telekom AG started its agile journey in 2013 and has already has been through a couple of ups and downs with regard to transformation. Thus, other departments that are just about to begin their journey can learn from their experience."

Telekom - a pioneer of an agile organizational set-up

The corporate communications team at Deutsche Telekom is a true pioneer when it comes to agile structures. The transformation of the department was covered in previous issues of Communication Insights (#5 and #6, see p. 40) and in a couple of trade magazines and blogs (Schindera & Neuen, 2020; Hardt & Schmitt-Jones, 2019; Behrens & Merklingshaus, 2016; Schlechtriem, 2016).

In this issue we would like to take a deeper look at the process of reorganizing the communication department, and the reasons behind the initial decision and its implications.

Starting the agile transformation

The reorganization of Telekom's communications department did not happen completely voluntarily but was promoted by a rigid

downsizing program of the corporate headquarters in 2012. The communications department was forced to radically reduce its work staff by 40 percent. Although these were rough times, Philipp Schindera, Senior Vice President Corporate Communications, found that they had their benefits, too: *"Looking back, the reorganization we were in at that time forced us into change, on the one hand, but at the same time it facilitated it. We had thought about reorganizing our team before but always dismissed the idea. This time, we had to change in a radical way. The inevitability of the situation made it easier to get acceptance and support from all levels involved – from the board to every team member."*

In addition to the prescribed downsizing program, changing communication habits and the management of new channels and tasks made transformation inevitable. The old departmental structure with a strict separation between different subunits and a rigid hierarchy was found to be no longer appropriate. The new structure was the result of a lengthy thought process that



» It takes a lot of courage and willingness to take such a step. Letting go of the familiar and accepting the new is easier said than done. «

*Elfriede Schmitt-Jones, Vice President, Communications Service,
Deutsche Telekom*

had started three years before. The preparation and implementation phase took more than half a year and was mainly driven by Philipp Schindera and his management team. The effort, however, has paid off. The initial structure, while adapted here and there, has passed the test of time.

The agile structure of Telekom’s communication department

In the past, the department was very traditionally organized in subdepartments dedicated to stakeholders, channels and internal and external target groups. Today, the majority of all communication employees make up the pool – the so-called **content factory**. They can be assigned to different projects depending on their availability, interests, and skills. Permanent project teams exist for special tasks such as events or pool management.

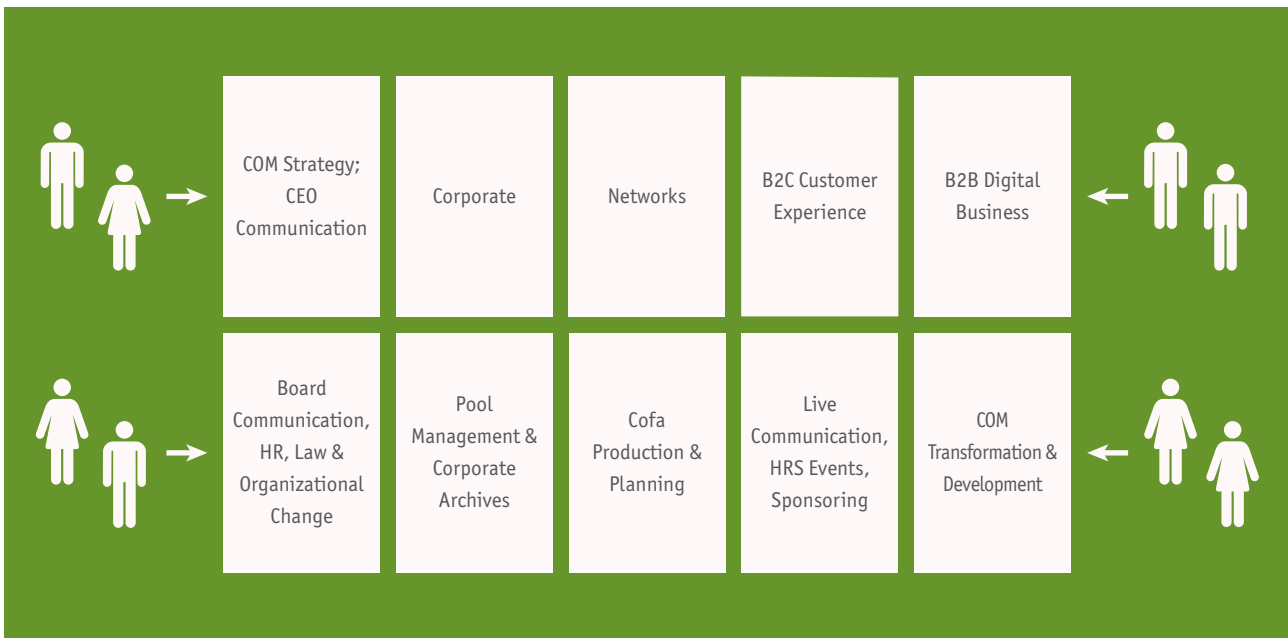
The pool itself is structured into **ten clusters** that reflect the main tasks but also the topics of the COM team. Every task, every job, every project is assigned to one of the clusters. The cluster managers coordinate the different projects but with a few exceptions do not take over disciplinary responsibility for the members of the project teams. With their expert position they are the first point of contact for the Management Board. They are leading and managing their topics and are responsible for the overall strategic alignment.

The ten clusters are aligned via a **management circle** consisting of all cluster managers, three committee members with special tasks such as accounting, and the members of the executive team.

The number of **employees** in a project depends on the number of tasks. In addition, employees take on different tasks in different projects at the same time. This is supposed to ensure stronger collaboration and a significant improvement in the exchange of information. Each employee should work on a maximum of three projects. Some employees take over a project lead or project owner role and do not have further capacities to work on several topics. Others, especially channel experts, are usually involved in more than one project at the same time.

It is the responsibility of the **pool management** to keep track of things and employ people accordingly. Corinne Metz, Communications Manager within the pool management, explains: *“It is important for us to manage the process of project staffing and link it with an overall HR development perspective for COM. Of course, every project head wants the most experienced and qualified people for his or her project. However, it is important not to overbook those colleagues while at the same time broadening their skill set and developing all members of the team. We sometimes challenge colleagues by assigning them to new tasks or projects but also support them by learning on the job. It is something that has to be decided individually and anew with every incoming project and colleague involved.”*

The organization of the COM pool



The employees of the pool can be assigned to ten topic clusters. Each cluster is managed by a cluster manager who coordinates the different projects.



» I remember one incident when a young but experienced and capable colleague of mine acted as the project owner for a major project. The task required company-wide collaboration with members from other departments, many of them from senior levels. In the beginning, some even refused to work with her, refused to answer her emails or go to the meetings she set up. I had to step in and make sure they would accept her as project lead. However, these experiences have become very rare as our company culture changes and hierarchies and the old insignias of power become less and less relevant. Our department definitely was pioneering these developments. «

Philipp Schindera, Senior Vice President Corporate Communications, Deutsche Telekom

The leadership team

The department is led by an overall executive team consisting of Philipp Schindera and a leadership team of seven people.

- ▶ Four key account managers of the pool's content clusters:
 - Corporate
 - Board Communications, HR, Legal & Organizational Change
 - B2C Customer Experience
 - B2B Digital Economy
- ▶ The Head of Communication Service who manages the pool organization including all personnel and budget issues. This includes performance reviews, education and training, as well as the assignment of employees and the distribution of budgets to the projects.
- ▶ The Head of Communications Strategy who is responsible for Deutsche Telekom's overarching communication strategy and CEO positioning.
- ▶ The Head of Digital Transformation and Development who ensures that the department is ready to face future challenges such as digitization.

Main challenge: Lateral leadership and intraorganizational power zones

Deutsche Telekom learned that the mere structural reorganization was not their main problem. The biggest challenge was the change in the balance of power and the abandonment of comfort zones on many levels. When asked what she would do differently in retrospect, Schmitt-Jones said that she would especially address the topic of lateral leadership.

Lateral leadership, or lateral management, means the abandonment of hierarchies in the traditional sense. Teams or units are no longer permanent and subordinated to a certain person. Leadership positions are not fixed but fluctuate and rotate. Every employee can be appointed to a leadership position such as project owner in one project, while at the same time acting as a normal team member in another project.

This change was difficult for everyone. Even former team or department heads had a hard time with this in the beginning. "It's simply a difference whether you have unlimited access to a team of, say, five people, or whether you manage these people as a project manager but at the same time share them with one or two other project managers," says Schmitt-Jones.

To address this problem, the pool management together with HR established an elaborate training program that caters to the different needs of staff resulting from the new way of working together (see STEP 4: PEOPLE). Schmitt-Jones reflects: *“The most important thing about reorganization is that you have to think holistically. You cannot just change the structure. At the same time, you have to keep in mind what this means for the culture, for HR applications and tools, for platforms and work processes.”*

Another difficulty, especially in the beginning, was that most internal stakeholders remained in a more traditional hierarchal structure. Philipp Schindera reported a few incidents when he had to support younger colleagues in their relations with more senior staff outside his department.

Interim conclusion

After nearly seven years of working in the new organizational structure, the majority of all interview partners we talked to came to a positive conclusion: *“I really enjoy the increase in flexibility and freedom. The opportunities to try out different tasks and projects have definitely increased. Additionally, the relationship to my colleagues has changed. People are much more interested to learn from each other and to share their skills,”* says one pool member.

Of course, there are employees that are not satisfied with the new ways of working. Some complained about the heightened dynamic and flexibility of work and felt they could not cope with these demands. Others left the team because they wanted to pursue a more traditional career elsewhere. However, those still on board agree with the new setup.

In the end, the new structure was, on the one hand, relatively stable in its principal idea, while, on the other hand, it has been adapted and improved several times during subsequent years. This goes hand in hand with the central idea of agility: to create a principal structure that is flexible enough to be adapted if needed. The internal and external stakeholder environment that communication departments act in today is constantly in flux, thus, their structure and work procedures have to be flexible, too.



i CAVEAT

Agile organizational structures are not without problems. As one of the few critical voices in the discourse on agility, the organizational sociologist Stefan Kühl (2017) points out three fundamental problems of agile organizational structures which we can confirm from our own impressions:

- **Securing identity:** Departmental or sub-departmental affiliations, stable team members and a fixed set of tasks and topics create identification for staff members and feelings of belonging and a shared mission that are harder to achieve in more dynamic, unstable environments. Some communication departments, therefore, refrain from dissolving sub-departments because they do not want employees to lose their ‘homes.’
- **Unclear power relations:** Agile organizations have to cope with informal power struggles since they are no longer kept in check by the hierarchy or regulated by formal structures. This leads to a permanent politicization of internal processes and decisions, which is particularly difficult for some employees.
- **Internal complexity:** The loss of clear structures and processes results in a different form of complexity. The more agile and flexible that structures and processes become, the more fragile they are and the more they create a high degree of uncertainty and complexity. If there is no hierarchical security, zones of uncertainty arise in the assumption of responsibility, which are ultimately passed on to the employees or in turn to the manager.

STEP 1:
CULTURE

STEP 2:
WORK

STEP 3:
STRUCTURE

STEP 4:
PEOPLE

STEP 5:
EVALUATION

STEP 4: PEOPLE

ESTABLISHING A NEW APPROACH TO PEOPLE MANAGEMENT THAT SUITS AND SUPPORTS AGILE WORK AND A FLEXIBLE ORGANIZATIONAL SETUP

People management certainly is one of the main challenges of the agile transformation. Usually, considering the implications of these HR-related aspects team comes to mind too late. Instead, you should think about how to enable your team to work in a more agile setup through adapted people management tools right from the start of your transformation. STEP 4 will discuss three main areas that should be taken into consideration.

“HR is in my opinion the main preventer of agility!”, revealed one chief communication officer – an impression that was implicitly shared by many people we talked to in the course of our research project. The rigid guidelines and restrictions of human resources departments and work committees were often named as the main hurdle when it comes to innovative approaches toward an agile employee management. However, we also found many examples where communications and HR worked hand in hand to allow for adaptive and flexible solutions.

Communication departments that pursue an agile transformation have to refocus their people management in three main areas:

- ▶ Job rotation and role switch
- ▶ Competence management and training
- ▶ Careers and incentives

Three essential dimensions of people management in agile communication departments



Job rotation and role switch

To address the interconnected and interdependent nature of content production and distribution in communication, as well as to allow for people to work most effectively and efficiently, employees in agile structures often take on different roles (**role switch**) and tasks (**job rotation**) at the same time: in one project they are product owner, in the next Scrum master, and in a third content or channel expert. This usually happens simultaneously since many employees are constantly involved in three to six projects – unless they take on a leadership position in a major project that occupies all of their time.

This can quickly lead to **leadership and role conflicts**. Colleagues will meet as equal team members in one project, while one of them is authorized to give instructions to others and in the next project it is vice versa. This can be problematic, especially when prior to the transformation one was subordinate to the other.

Furthermore, the attempts to create more agile structures and processes can create complex matrix structures with **unclear hierarchies and reporting lines**. Staff members that work in different projects automatically have different people to report to. As stated above, hierarchies have a stabilizing effect on organizations. If hierarchical orders are now fluctuating and sometimes even turned upside down, spheres of insecurity are created and might even lead to a leadership vacuum. People have to be prepared to deal with this. This preparation best happens in the form of a newly designed competence management and training program.

Flexibilizing roles and functions principally stands in contrast to the specialization that has long been propagated in the industry. In the meantime, many communication departments have started to look for **generalists** who can be deployed more flexibly. This can have a positive effect on the aspect of lateral career development as people develop a diverse skill set that can also be of use outside the communication department. However, being flexible can also turn out to be counterproductive. A constant change of personnel on certain jobs, roles and functions can lead to **information gaps** and the breakup of long-term relationships with stakeholders. Particularly in situations where a basis of trust has been established over years with certain stakeholders, such as journalists or board members, a rotation is inappropriate. This is why many agile companies have not given up on all areas of expertise. Some people remain outside the general 'pool' (see STEP 2: structure). While this makes sense, it can lead to negative feelings among colleagues such as envy and disfavor. Therefore, it is advisable that these people, too, integrate themselves into the overall team, for instance, by sharing their expertise and exclusive insights with colleagues.

Another problem with these dynamic structures is that the disciplinary manager **lacks an overview** of the employee's performance in the various projects and positions. This is where more transparency and new approaches to performance management (see STEP 5: Evaluation) are needed. To meet these challenges, it is important to set a framework in which role profiles and task descriptions are clearly defined.

Competencies management and training

Communication departments that embrace a more agile way of working have to equip their employees with the respective competencies and skills to tackle that task. Oftentimes, this challenge is underestimated or simply not seen. But in an increasingly dynamic and flexible work environment, **life-long learning** opportunities are necessary in order to tackle the challenges of job rotation and role switch.

Long-term employability is one aspect in a volatile field like communication, being equipped with adequate skills and competencies is another. However, this is a shared responsibility: Companies must provide a **work environment that facilitates learning** and actively supports individual learning processes for their employees in order to promote self-efficacy and lifelong employability. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions for this – all employees should be provided with solutions tailored to their specific needs. They should be able to engage in more targeted on-the-job and on-demand learning and have access to new, increasingly digital learning solutions. Likewise, employees will need to do their bit by learning more autonomously and self-reliantly. Taking care of your own career will become more important in times when career paths become more obscure and insecure.

In agile structures, not only long-standing managers but also younger employees sometimes take on a **managerial role** by acting as product or project owners, for example, without having been prepared for this through long-term training programs. The ability to manage yourself and others will become a core competence for all employees in the future. **Self-management**, for instance, in the sense that employees are able to assess the time they spend on certain tasks and projects, will be more relevant. Thus, the opportunity to acquire this expertise must not be reserved for a select group of current and future managers but has to be available to all employees. This does not only apply to self-management skills but also to general management and leadership skills.

In addition to (self-) leadership competencies, a high degree of diversity in terms of **channel and topic expertise** is also

» *It is advisable to accompany reorganizational changes also on a personal experience level, for instance, by reflecting experiences plus offering coaching on processes and agile expertise. The relevance of these things only becomes apparent when you are working in these new structures. Still, I wish we had addressed the question of competencies with regard to lateral management and working in agile organizations earlier on.* «

Corinne Metz, Senior Communication Expert, Deutsche Telekom

required of all employees. As discussed above, employees should be able to take on different roles and tasks in different projects, contexts, and subject areas. In agile, cross-functional projects, broad knowledge is necessary to be able to work together in an interdisciplinary way across departments.

Today, transferring knowledge and skills is organized in the form of **peer-to-peer learning formats** and many companies are rethinking their internal training programs. In particular, technical skills, for example video creation, which used to be purchased or learned from experts, can also be passed on within the team. The basic prerequisite here, however, is that employees are willing to share their knowledge. In many organizations, knowledge is still seen as an instrument of power and is not shared. Therefore, it is crucial that **knowledge sharing** becomes part of the job description, and employees can help by reserving a certain proportion of their working time for this responsibility (see STEP 5: EVALUATION). The internal knowledge transfer can also be supported by a company-wide, constantly updated database in which the competencies of the employees are recorded.

To identify suitable employees for the respective projects quickly and efficiently, a **resource management and a skills and competencies database** makes sense. Here, various job profiles such as copywriter, project manager, event manager, AV editor, or photo editor are uploaded. Each profile consists of various skills, such as leadership, project management, editorial writing, interviewing or storytelling. This can provide a better overview of the existing and required skills as well as any qualification requirements. In case such a database exists, employees can link themselves with one or more job profile and skill. They can, for instance, also state their levels of expertise and state jobs they are currently doing or want to do in the future.

The corporate communications department of Deutsche Telekom successfully introduced such a skill database three years ago: *“For three years now we have had a skill database named ‘Competence.’ It’s linked to our resource management database.*

Therefore, we can assess simultaneously who has free resources at which time, who owns which skills, and who requires further training. We went this way in agreement with the works committee. The database definitely helps us to staff our projects,” says Elfriede Schmitt-Jones, who is in charge of communication services at the company.

Such a database coupled with human resources management allows for a more goal-oriented further training program and more efficient project staffing. Updating the database should be an integral part of the performance assessment between the disciplinary superior and the individual employee and should be used as a basis for further development and advancement measures.

Career & Incentives

Agile reorganization often goes hand in hand with **removing hierarchical levels** and democratization of decision-making processes. This poses not only a challenge for leadership and guidance as missing hierarchies lead to unclear chains of command and a possible politicization of internal processes. It is also challenging to provide alternative career paths and incentives for motivated employees.

What can these alternatives look like?

- ▶ **Establish expert career paths:** Traditionally, leadership positions are linked to the number of people in your team who report to you. This system is outdated. In the future, career development will be more lateral rather than horizontal, linked to a certain kind of expertise and areas of interest.
- ▶ **Lateral development:** Giving the staff the opportunity to try out different areas and media channels, learn from peers, prove themselves in prominent projects, etc. is meant to compensate for the lack of promotion prospects. Additionally, incentives such as international work rotation programs or sabbaticals can also become an alternative to the classic corporate career.



- ▶ **Individual motivation:** Every person is motivated differently. Principally, there is the possibility of monetary versus non-monetary incentives. In the past decade, the general trend was to reduce monetary incentives in favor of non-monetary ones such as praise or recognition, suggestions schemes or job enrichment.
- ▶ **Spot-Boni:** Even in agile work environments many employees prefer monetary incentives. Thus, it is important that any monetary incentive schemes are designed to support the overall value creation process and go hand in

hand with agile principles of work. This means incentives should be more flexible and should support the collaborative character of work. Some companies have jettisoned individual bonus payments at the end of the year and established Spot-Boni ('spot bonus') programs for individuals or teams for excellent short-term performance instead. Some companies are even experimenting with the approach to pay such bonuses exclusively at a team level. On the one hand, the bonus is granted not by the executive but by the team colleagues, and second the Boni is linked to the team and not individual performance.

i CAVEAT

While the abolition of hierarchies and the democratization of organizations are usually heralded as employee liberation with a focus on their positive aspects such as more freedom, self-determination, less compulsory attendance or 'free coffee,' we also found some problems with these alternative approaches toward career development and incentives.

- The interviews and informal talks with junior and middle-management staff revealed that most of them were frustrated with the **lack of career opportunities** in agile structures. Abandoning leadership positions means abandoning stepping-stones for younger team members. Although a corporate career has always been a risky and competitive affair, lately it has become even more difficult.
- In those organizations that had already undergone an agile transformation, we oftentimes found a **non-homogeneous salary structure** due to the still-valid collective wage agreements. Thus, albeit on paper former departmental

structures and hierarchies have been abandoned, employees that did hold a team lead or department lead position in the past still earn more than their colleagues.

- Junior employees for whom the question of promotional prospects is still very important were sometimes frustrated by the **lack of provable career advancement**. Although in principle they endorsed the perspective of lateral development within a department or company, they consider it problematic that in case of a job change, there is no chance to produce some proof of vertical development, either in the form of titles or leadership responsibilities in order to find a more advanced job in another company.

Thus, career and further development opportunities have to be reconsidered in agile work environments. Otherwise you lose exactly the kind of people you hope to keep on board: motivated, dedicated employees who do not hesitate to 'walk the extra mile' for the firm.



CASE STUDY SIEMENS: PEOPLE DEVELOPMENT IN AGILE ORGANIZATIONS

Siemens AG is a German multinational conglomerate company headquartered in Munich and the largest industrial manufacturing company in Europe. The principal divisions of the company are Industry, Energy, Healthcare (Siemens Healthineers), and Infrastructure & Cities, which represent the main activities of the company. Siemens and its subsidiaries employ around 385,000 people worldwide and reported a global revenue of around EUR 87 billion in 2019.

The Siemens communications team embarked on a transformation journey focused on collaboration and co-creation. To enable this, new training formats and a different competency management were required within the teams.

Siemens' transformation journey

A couple of years ago, the Siemens Communications team embarked on a transformation journey focused on collaboration and co-creation. Clarissa Haller, Head of Siemens Corporate Communications, has defined four strategic pillars: collaboration, digitalization, people development and culture

change. In recent years, the communications community, comprising approximately 500 people in Germany and 500 in international subsidiaries, has increasingly used agile working methods, such as working in squads. To enable the communications community to embrace the transformation, new training formats and a different competency management were required within the teams.

Interview with Nicole Weckwerth, Siemens AG

Dr. Lisa Dühning visited Siemens Headquarters in Munich in July 2019 and talked to Nicole Weckwerth, at the time Director Set-up and Resources, about their current initiatives and platforms for people and career development.

Nicole, you are responsible for people development and talent management within the Siemens communications team. Over recent years, the communications department has undergone a massive reorganization. How important are people management and career development for this new structure?

Both are essential. When Clarissa Haller assumed the role of Head of Siemens Corporate Communications in 2016, one of her main goals was to stress the importance of lifelong learning and employability. Working in a fast-changing and dynamic environment, as well as facing the challenges of the digital transformation, every team member needs to continually hone their skills and ensure that their competencies remain relevant. There has been a general change in how we approach talent and career development. For us, 'Own your career' is not just a slogan. Our employees are supported by an ecosystem of Own Your Career tools and methods. Mentoring, job shadowing, and also our online program Strength Finder are tools that enable you to determine and drive your own development. With Strength Finder you can identify your strengths and continue to build on them. Based on these findings, Siemens offers each employee a broad range of training and courses to match their individual needs.

What kind of training do you offer to the employees of the communication department?

We have fundamentally changed our approach to training in recent years. Whereas in the past we have conducted many face-to-face training sessions with external trainers, today we offer most of our programs virtually and in-house. Much is done by colleagues for colleagues. Recently we initiated a training series consisting of short impulse sessions for management followed by Lunch & Learn sessions for employees and a follow-up for both parties in the Jour Fixes.

In order to think outside the box, we invite experts to provide insights into their work or research. For example, we invited a social media



Nicole Weckwerth, former Director Set-up and Resources at Siemens

consultant who was involved in the presidential election campaign of Barack Obama, as well as network specialists and mindfulness experts.

Furthermore, we have found that people in interdisciplinary teams – our squads – learn many new skills from their colleagues. We have greatly emphasized the on-the-job learning approach as we are increasingly working in interdisciplinary project teams with rotating employees. Thus, we want to ensure that the skills and competencies in our team are shared across the entire department.

Apart from these peer-to-peer learning approaches, are there any special skills or competencies you realized your colleagues need in order to work in a more flexible and dynamic environment?

Yes, definitely. We understand that in order to be able to work collaboratively and agilely, one needs an enhanced set of competencies and skills. Over the past months, my team and I have concentrated on establishing a virtual platform, the Communications Learning World. This is an online channel for the communication community. In the Learning World, one can find the necessary competencies and skills needed to tackle the current and future challenges communicators will face.

For each role within our team and for all defined competencies, we have compiled general information, articles, blog entries, videos – for instance from our Speaker's Series – presentations, webinars, etc. We also refer to the overall Siemens Learning World managed by our HR team and the learning programs offered by them. For some roles, we have over 300 entries.

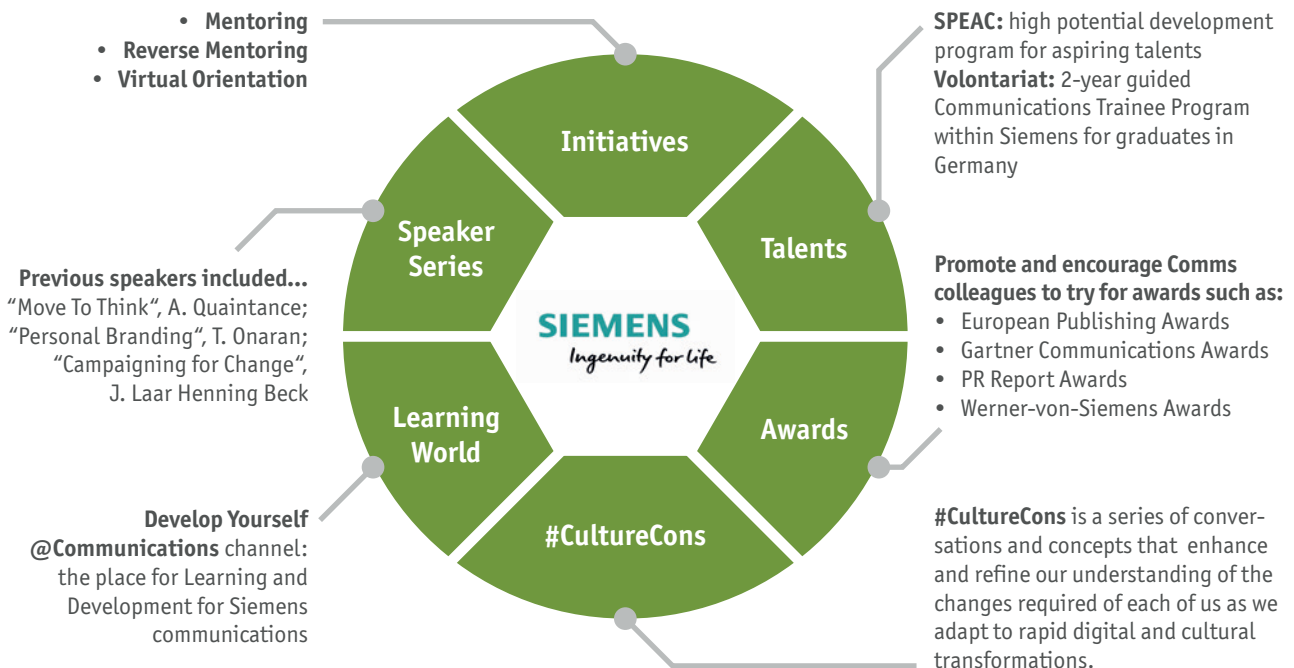
Organizing and managing the content of this learning platform probably requires a lot of resources. How do you manage that with your team?

We have established a community of curators that sources and manages information from the different teams in our department. A curator is responsible for a certain topic or field of interest such as social media or analytics. It can either be technical skills or expertise or content/topic-related knowledge. We ask them to provide knowledge and insights from their squads like interesting news, such as a video – whatever could be potentially beneficial for their colleagues. Thus, the Learning World has become kind of a knowledge-sharing platform. Also, our trainees created an introductory video series providing basic insights such as “How to do a video” or “How to use Instagram.”

How have you achieved the buy-in of the curators who have to put in extra time and extra effort to build-up the Learning World?

It is not easy to motivate our team members to assume the role of curator since it comes on top of their daily work. In the beginning, incentives were required. Sharing knowledge and providing peer-to-peer learning had to become part of their general job description and performance review. Slowly we are getting there – more and more team members are using the Learning World and discovering a universe of different development formats.

People Development @ SIEMENS



STEP 1:
CULTURE

STEP 2:
WORK

STEP 3:
STRUCTURE

STEP 4:
PEOPLE

STEP 5:
EVALUATION

STEP 5: EVALUATION

MEASURING PERFORMANCE AND RESULTS OF AGILE WORK ENVIRONMENTS

Agility is not a goal in itself. After an often long, exhausting, and expensive change process, it is imperative to evaluate whether the results have really been worth the pain. After all, agility is supposed to make work more efficient and effective, not just more fun and fulfilling. Therefore, STEP 5 reflects on the necessity of a different approach toward target and performance management in agile structures that gives incentives to employees and motivates them to become autonomous, innovative high performers in the company. But not only employee performance is to be evaluated. It is equally important to frequently evaluate the advantages and downsides of the agile transformation and make the necessary adjustments.

Adjusting traditional performance management to agile work and structures

The idea of traditional performance management is based on slow and stable markets and an annual target management. It puts a lot of emphasis on extrinsic incentives such as salary, bonuses, and promotion. It oftentimes neglects the actual value creation and usually rewards sticking to a fixed plan instead of thinking outside the box.

This model no longer does justice to an agile work environment, especially not in a highly dynamic communications environment. In the future, it will be important for employees to receive regular feedback throughout the year on their current tasks. Short-term goals create a framework that motivates and actively involves employees. Also, in the past, a manager's status and salary were based on the size of the projects he or she was responsible for and the number of employees on his or her team. Today, performance review will care less about the individual performance of managers or staff and more about the team as a whole.



Alternative approaches

In the future, it will be more and more difficult to rate employees' performance on the basis of their individual contributions as doing so does not include in the reckoning the increasingly cooperative, team-oriented character of work. Companies like ING are already experimenting with shifting performance measurement to the team level. ING's so-called **Quarterly Business Reviews (QBRs)** are used to evaluate the results of project teams (tribes) in a quarter, to define the most important lessons learned and to set realistic and clearly formulated goals for the next quarter. In addition, QBRs should clearly state what kind of input or cooperation is needed with other tribes. The review documents are public and accessible to everyone, which promotes transparency within and between departments.

Other companies in our sample have started to set up their target management systems according to the **Objectives and Key**

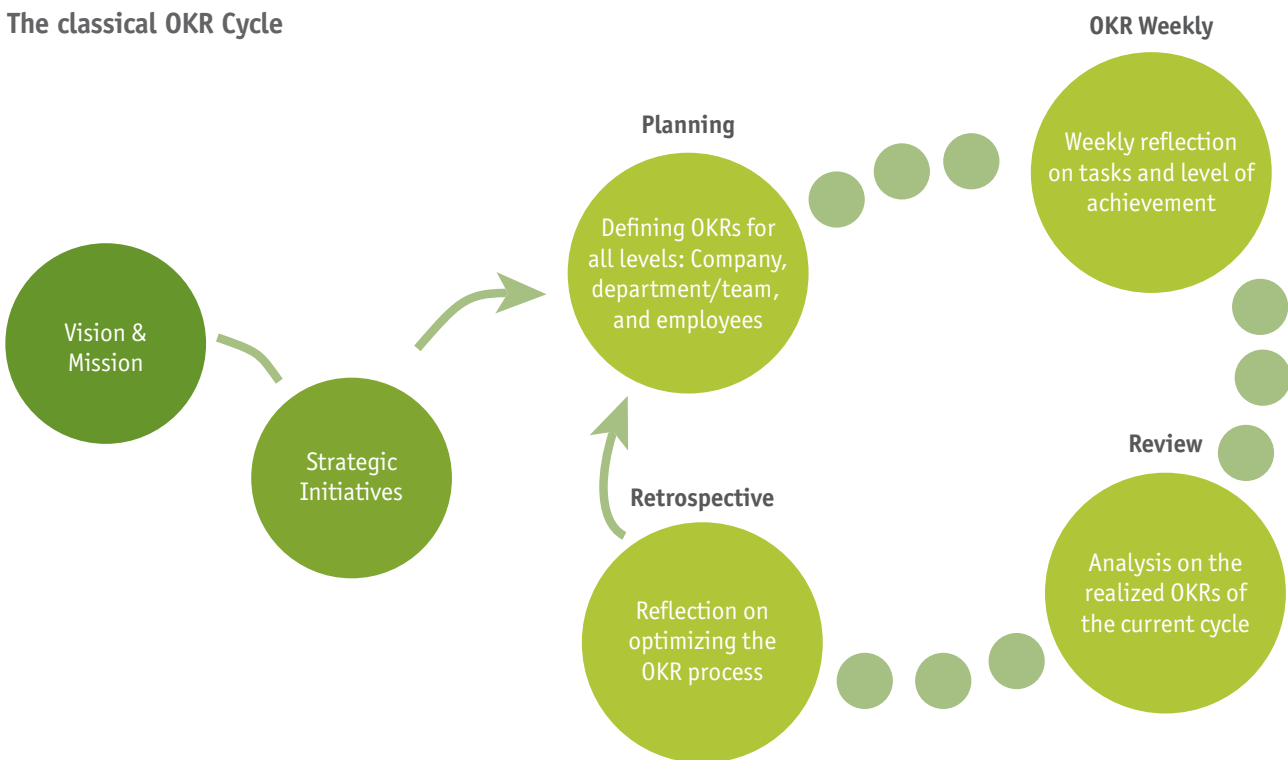
Results (OKR) method (Doerr, 2018; Niven & Lamorte, 2016). This method enables a structured target agreement process by breaking down the global targets into the individual value creation contribution of each team and employee.

The OKR method takes into account new conditions in the digital world where targets or the conditions for these targets change so quickly that either the achievement of the target is unrealistic or the target itself becomes invalid. On the one hand, OKRs aim to define short-term (usually quarterly) targets, prioritizing them differently if the general conditions change. The OKR method also can help employees to better understand the purpose of their work by linking their individual goals to the overall corporate strategy.

Thus, OKR display three basic characteristics:

- ▶ short-term focus
- ▶ conscious prioritization
- ▶ orientation toward a long-term vision

The classical OKR Cycle



READING RECOMMENDATION:

WORKPATH Magazin (in German only): www.workpath.com/magazine

Agile alignment of target systems – working with OKR at Deutsche Telekom AG

The communication department of Deutsche Telekom AG started to experiment with implementing the OKR method by the end of 2018. Their former target management system had its flaws and did not seem to be flexible and dynamic enough to cope with the requirements of their agile structure and work processes (see STEP 3). The old system was mainly used for budget and resource planning, but it was not clear how the success criteria contributed to the strategic goals. Often targets did not include clear metrics, target values and target periods. Overall, the use of metrics happened rather haphazardly. There was a lack of department-wide transparency regarding goals and success criteria for the individual projects. This encouraged duplication of work and uncoordinated approaches. Thus, in 2019 the communication team of Deutsche Telekom started to manage and review their four major projects according to OKR principles.

Specific positioning targets were derived from Deutsche Telekom's corporate strategy, such as "Deutsche Telekom is positioned as a pioneer in network expansion". All members of a lead project defined four to five key results and how achievement should be measured. The key results were translated into workable projects. The degree of achievement of each key result was analyzed and evaluated in short cycles by the lead project team. Based on these results, the activities for the next cycle were adapted as necessary. The process itself was supported by an external service provider who also trained several internal employees as OKR coaches.

As the approach worked well, the communication executive team decided to roll the method out for the whole department. By the beginning of 2020 every project of the ten clusters (see p. 25)

was managed and monitored according to OKR principles. The objective of each of the ten clusters is derived from the overall communication strategy, which is itself derived from the overall corporate strategy. This alignment is necessary to ensure that the projects within each of the content clusters contribute to the overall corporate goals (see *Communication Insights* #3, p. 40).

The main departure from traditional communication-controlling systems is the review of the level of target achievement on a regular basis. Usually, the project teams meet every two weeks for a review of the current project status and assess target achievement. About once a month, the whole cluster meets to evaluate the success of the different projects. The OKR process is monitored via an 'OKR Radar' Excel sheet that is available to the whole department, so absolute transparency is given on every project at all times.

"The OKR method is designed to encourage innovative and ambitious thinking and action. We need a target system that is as flexible and dynamic as our work and the environment we communicate in. Also, the OKR method creates the transparency and legitimacy we need to cooperate as a team. Everyone should know why they are working on which project and how this aligns with the rest of the department and the company as a whole."

*Philipp Schindera, SVP Corporate Communications,
Deutsche Telekom AG*

i CAVEAT

As has been said above, agility is not a goal in itself. Thus, it is important to regularly check and reflect on whether the steps you took on your agile transformation really helped to solve your problems, whether they be problems of collaboration, superfluous and time-consuming processes, or a culture of fear and mistrust.

We learned in our research project that it was not opportune to talk negatively about the agile transformation in some companies, or to scrutinize some methods or procedures. But agility should not become an untouchable ideal that everyone has to strive for no matter the costs. Some aspects and steps discussed above might be very valuable for a specific team; others not. Thus, a culture of openness

and honesty should also be adopted when it comes to the agile transformation itself. Maybe, in the beginning, anonymous regular feedback from all employees can be an option. Later on, teams would be well advised to establish regular feedback circles to discuss the status quo of their agile journey and also be prepared to reverse some steps or take another direction.

Agility is not delivered off the rack but has to be adopted very individually. As explained above, some tools or methods are just not compatible with procedures and arrangements within the rest of the organization. In this case, it would be sensible to adjust the method, structure, or process in order to make it fit, instead of it causing unnecessary friction just for the sake of the idea.



CONCLUSION: AGILITY IN THE TIME OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND BEYOND

When we started the research project 'Agility in Corporate Communications' three years ago, the concept of agility was just on the rise. Most had heard about it, and some companies had already started to transform or engage in cultural change programs. Agility was still very much dominated by the overall challenge of the digital transformation. Major companies had established innovation hubs or start-up-like subunits that experimented with agile ways of working.

During the course of the past few years, we explored the implications of agility in many facets: conceptually and in its implications for communication departments (Communication Insights #5), in the context of topic management, discussing the newsroom approach (Communication Insights #6), and regarding the role of external service providers and consultants in this field (Communication Insights #7, see p. 40).

We have seen the issue peak within the communication community in the past two years. Most industry meetings or conferences have addressed agility in some way. We discovered many interesting approaches and initiatives in a diverse range of companies – each one tackling the challenge differently. In 2019, the topic of agility merged with related discussions around the concept of new work and corporate purpose.

Then, in the last few months of our research project, the COVID-19 pandemic completely changed the agenda. Questions about

#NewWork were replaced by questions about the #NewNormal. And although we cannot foresee how the crisis will affect companies and their communication departments in the long run, we can draw a few conclusions about the future of agile approaches from what we learned in the past. The experiences of the pandemic will reveal the strengths – but also the weaknesses – of agile self-organization in many companies. After all, agility means reacting flexibly to new conditions and actively seeking solutions.



Lesson 1: An agile culture has helped in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis.

Communication departments that have been investing in agile, self-organizing teams for some time are much better able to cope with the new situation. Central aspects of an agile cultural change program include trust and courage, result orientation, a changed error culture, and shorter decision-making processes – all these are now adding value for companies. Empowerment and self-organized teams that manage themselves independently can respond more quickly to changes in this dynamic environment. Also, a different approach toward leadership can help in volatile times. Behaviors such as letting go, having trust, and encouraging colleagues to implement their own ideas help maintain effectiveness in situations of crisis. Companies that encouraged their employees to adopt these approaches before the coronavirus struck are able to switch faster and more smoothly into the #NewNormal mode.



Lesson 2: The use of software tools has helped to make teams more agile.

The corona crisis has demonstrated the enormous benefit of a sophisticated technical infrastructure. Companies that have been using digital tools (e.g. Jira, Confluence, Yammer, Office365) and flexible home office arrangements for a long time and are equipped with the corresponding IT infrastructure are in pole position. Their communication teams have been able to work remotely without major disruptions, accessing content and data from any location and transferring collaboration into the virtual sphere.



Lesson 3: Cross-functional cooperation has improved.

Crises are usually times when people and companies as well move closer together. In many companies, the corona crisis has led to a situation in which many divisions needed to collaborate quickly and without complications. In companies where this form of cross-departmental collaboration had already become the norm, new coordination processes were soon established. In particular, the IT, HR, and communication departments had to cooperate intensively to allow for employees to work from home and to keep them informed about the current status quo. Those companies that had already established social intranets and active online communities could quickly use these platforms to, for instance, create intranet pages, provide online tutorials on working remotely, and give employees opportunities for exchanging ideas and interacting.



Lesson 4: Heterogeneous teams cope better with crisis.

The corona crisis exemplified the importance of heterogeneous teams. Younger employees are usually more flexible, more open, and able to adapt more quickly to changing situations. They are used to working digitally and remotely and use project management and collaboration tools with a greater degree of confidence. Older employees, on the other hand, are more laid back and remain calm even in critical times. Their experience of life and work helps them in times of crisis. Virtual, location-independent working, as we are currently experiencing in many organizations, is breaking down barriers to mobility and could be an opportunity to attract new talents who need to work from home, for example, because they have small children to look after, live elsewhere, or have difficulty traveling due to physical limitations.

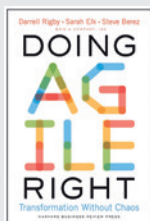
Considering these benefits, it is likely that communication leaders will continue to reflect upon the topics discussed in this publication. Still, processes of agile transformation require a lot of time and energy and financial resources. Given the scarcity of these resources in times of crisis and economic downturn, it is unlikely that companies will start major change programs in the near future apart from downsizing that is driven by market demands. Large-scale changes now would definitely put too much stress on employees and budgets. This is a challenge for each of the five steps discussed in this issue. Each of them saves the organization time and money. Each is supposed to increase the department's effectiveness and efficiency. In order to do so, however, first of all, time and money have to be invested. It would be best to approach major transformation not in times of crisis, but rather in times of stability.



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FURTHER READINGS



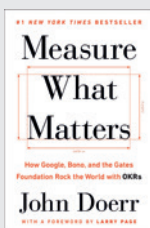
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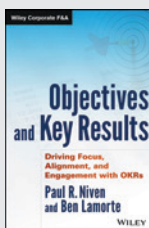
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ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

The Academic Society for Management & Communication is a joint initiative of leading companies and universities. Through collaborative research and knowledge sharing, it aims to actively shape the future of corporate communication. The initiative was founded in 2010, and today it is supported by four universities and approximately 40 corporate partners.

The Academic Society initiates practical, future-oriented research projects. They are multidisciplinary in nature and are designed as comprehensive studies that support the ongoing professionalization of corporate communications.

The Academic Society is part of the Günter Thiele Foundation for Communication & Management, a non-profit entity governed by state law that is dedicated to advancing science and knowledge transfer in the field of communications.

Value Creating Communication

From 2015 until 2020 the Academic Society conducted the world's most comprehensive research program in strategic corporate communications: Value Creating Communication. Researchers from the Universities of Leipzig, Duisburg-Essen, Muenster, and Vienna collaborated with corporate communication executives from leading companies to research the key challenges facing communication management today, such as digitalization and digital technologies, value creation, or coping with agility.

Also, the research project presented on the previous pages, investigating the agile transformation of communication departments, has been realized within Value Creating Communication.

In the past years, four research modules have been completed:

Module I: How has corporate communications changed due to new social conditions and megatrends – above all, digitalization and big data? (2015 – 2017, University of Muenster)

- ▶ Communication Insights, Issue 2: Wohin geht die Reise? (in German)
- ▶ Communication Insights, Issue 4: Startklar für Big Data (in German)

Module II: How do corporate communications create value for an organization? How are communication and business strategy aligned? What contributions can communications make to the overall business success? (2015 – 2017, Leipzig University)

- ▶ Communication Insights, Issue 1: Was bringt das alles? (in German)
- ▶ Communication Insights, Issue 3: How to play the game (in English)

Module III: How will agility transform corporate communications? How will collaboration with internal and external partners change? What can agile content management look like? (2017 – 2019, Universities of Leipzig, Münster, Vienna)

- ▶ Communication Insights, Issue 5: Fast and flexible (in English)
- ▶ Communication Insights, Issue 6: It's all about content (in English)
- ▶ Communication Insights, Issue 7: Erfolgsfaktor Beratung (in German)
- ▶ Communication Insights, Issue 8: Redesigning communications (in English)

Module IV: What influence do bots have on the social media communication of organizations? How can corporate communications apply bots for more effective communication? (2018 – 2020, University of Duisburg-Essen)

From digitalization to value creation, from big data to agility: Our previous issues of Communication Insights



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Research project: Corporate communications in agile organizations (2017-2020)

In an increasingly volatile environment, corporate communication faces the challenge of responding faster and more flexibly to change than in the past. To better tackle these challenges, more and more organizations have decided to implement agile processes and structures. The role of the communication departments is twofold: They have to communicate about the change process to gain the support of the entire staff. And they have to adapt their own structures, processes and competences accordingly. Becoming agile means to collaborate more closely within the department, with internal partners from other departments – e.g. for managing content – as well as with external partners such as consultancies or communication agencies. However, scientific studies as to which strategies have proven successful for an agile way of work have been rare. The research project “Corporate communications in agile organizations” addresses this gap and seeks to provide answers.

Given the complexity of an agile transformation, the overall research project was divided into three studies:

1 Agile communication departments: How can communication departments implement agile structures and processes supported by agile tools and technologies to allow for agile working? How can a new corporate culture and a different

leadership style support this change process? And what skills are required by employees to fulfill their new roles? (Leipzig University: Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass, Dr. Lisa Dühring)

2 The role of consultants and service providers for an agile transformation: How can external partners support communication departments in their endeavor to become agile? What kind of impact will this have on the collaboration with external partners? (University of Muenster, Prof. Dr. Ulrike Röttger, Dr. Christian Wiencierz)

3 Strategic topic management in agile organizations: How can content and topics be managed most efficiently in agile organizations? Have dedicated newsrooms proved helpful? (University of Vienna, Prof. Dr. Sabine Einwiller, Dr. Jens Seifert-Brockmann)

The Universities of Leipzig, Münster und Vienna have collaborated closely on studying benefits and challenges of agile communication departments. They have been supported by communication executives of renowned international corporations, consultancies, and agencies who have provided valuable insights into their daily work and shared their experiences with us.

Our research and corporate partners





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