



# Techstravaganza

TECHSTRAVAGANZA  
A POINTLESS STORY?

March 2025 Edition

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# TECHSTRAVAGANZA

## A POINTLESS STORY?

This booklet features the story of a team at the tech company called Techstravaganza. While fictional, it is inspired by what we saw, experienced, and went through in our own professional lives.

If you think the problems the team faces sound familiar, don't worry, you are not alone.

They are common dysfunctions that we've seen in many teams and organizations. The good news is, you and your team can change this.

However, it will require effort. While you follow the story along, you can see what the team at Techstravaganza tried. Similar things might work for you. Or you might want to try something else. Important is that you try, together with your team. Inspect and adapt. We wish you good luck and a lot of fun while doing so!

This booklet is dedicated to all the people that are out there trying to improve the way we work.

We hope you enjoy the story of Techstravaganza as much as we loved creating and shaping it!

Benjamin Huser-Berta and Peter Zylka-Greger  
Summer 2023

# TECHSTRAVAGANZA

## Chapter 1

Once upon a time, in the bustling metropolis of Silicon Heights, a tech company named "Techstravaganza" was on a mission to build a world-changing app. After they've been featured on Wired two years ago, just about every Software Engineer in the country wants to come to work for them.

Andrea, CEO, founder, and charismatic leader of the company just secured new investors. While this is good news for Techstravaganza, Allen is worried.

"New investors means the pressure to deliver will increase even more". His worry is not unwarranted. The team he's a part of is responsible for the "Cognitive Nexus Module", internally simply called "the engine" as it powers all the apps that Techstravaganza builds.

He already shared his concern with Rhea, the Scrum Master of the team.

She organizes an ad-hoc retrospective together with the full team to discuss Allen's concerns. Next to Allen, who is the Product Manager, there will be Philippe, a UX and Frontend Expert. Then there is Lorenzo, Software Architect, and Backend developer. Isabella the Data Scientist, Hiroshi the Database guru, and Ewelina who is known as the "Swiss Army Knife" and can "do it all".



# STRUGGLES

## Chapter 2

Rhea gives the word to Allen to share his concerns: "I feel like we've been struggling lately. I know you are all giving all you've got, but we still fail to deliver. Other teams depend on us, and they have been raising concerns with Andrea. With the new investors joining, I feel like the pressure will increase even more and I was wondering if we can do something about this".

Everyone in the room is nodding, but nobody says anything. Rhea fills the silence "Why don't we look at what doesn't work so well right now?"

Almost right after she finished the sentence, Lorenzo weighs in: "Well of course the other teams are annoyed at us. We cannot tell any of them when we'll manage to work on their requests. Instead of making a plan on how we get stuff done, we're discussing hours about whether something is 3 or 5 story points. I want to build stuff, not discuss esoteric measures."

Isabella nods from the other side of the table but stays quiet.

Hiroshi raises his voice "And what about our dailies? It does sound like we're meeting just to say I worked yesterday, I work today. I can see that on the board, what's the point of this? It feels to me we should talk more about how we can focus on getting stuff done not that we are looking at it".

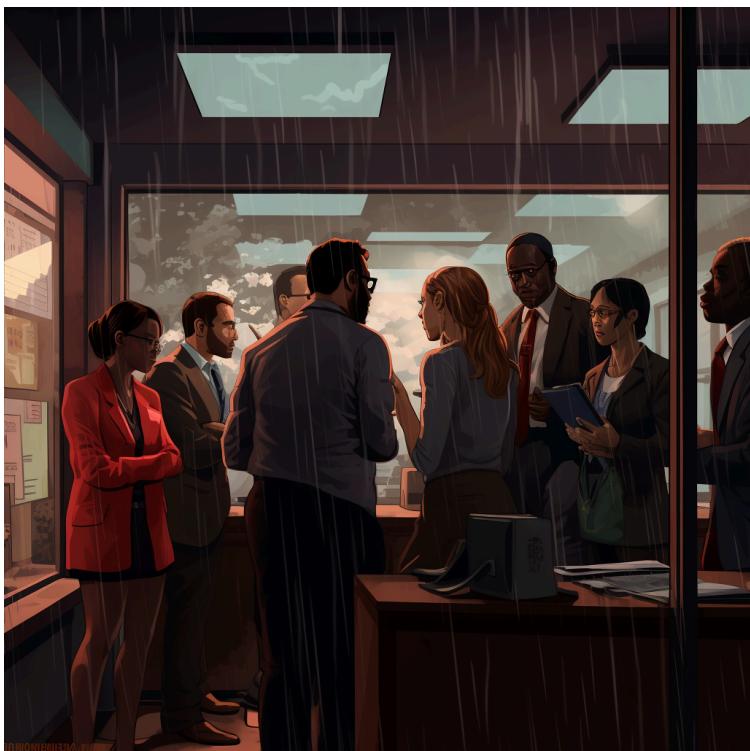
"Exactly" you can hear Ewelina mumble..."Often I'm looking for someone that I can support, but we never talk about this. So most of the time I'll just go and grab the next item on the board. However, I'd much prefer to collaborate with you instead of working on my own. Why do I even come to the office for this?"

Allen says with a low voice "By now, I'm almost afraid of going to the Sprint Review" and takes a sip of his water to let it sink in. He continues "Often we promise something but we are rarely delivering. Opening the review with having to disappoint the stakeholders is really taking a toll on me." "At least the stuff we deliver does look awesome" - Philippe tries to fill the awkward silence. Allen ignores it and continues "They want to know when things are done. When can they plan to do marketing campaigns? How long will this feature roughly take us? And I don't have any answer. How are others doing this?"

Isabella mentions that the data suggest that most teams work similarly.

Reha thanks everyone for their openness and courage to share. She puts an action on herself to follow up on all the mentioned items and concludes.

"We got to continue another time, now it's time for our refinement session". While Allen plugs in his laptop to share his screen with the Product Backlog, Reha starts distributing the Planning Poker Cards.



# THIS AIN'T FUN

## Chapter 3

It's been 3 weeks since the team had their ad-hoc retro. However, not much has changed so far. Today is the next Sprint Planning.

"Our velocity was a bit lower last Sprint, let's plan for 33 Story Points this time". Philippe adds that he's having a dentist appointment at the end of the week and that this should be taken into account.

"Isabella...Isabella...Issa!?" Reha raises her voice a bit. "Oh sorry, I was thinking about something...what do you need? No vacation planned, no".

Isabella is frustrated, as a data scientist she is used to analyzing data that supports decision-making. While these Sprint Plannings use some data, it does not feel analytical at all. "Reha and her Scrum friends always talk about inspecting and adapting, but we're never changing this stupid approach to planning, even though it obviously doesn't work. Is nobody else seeing this? This isn't fun..."

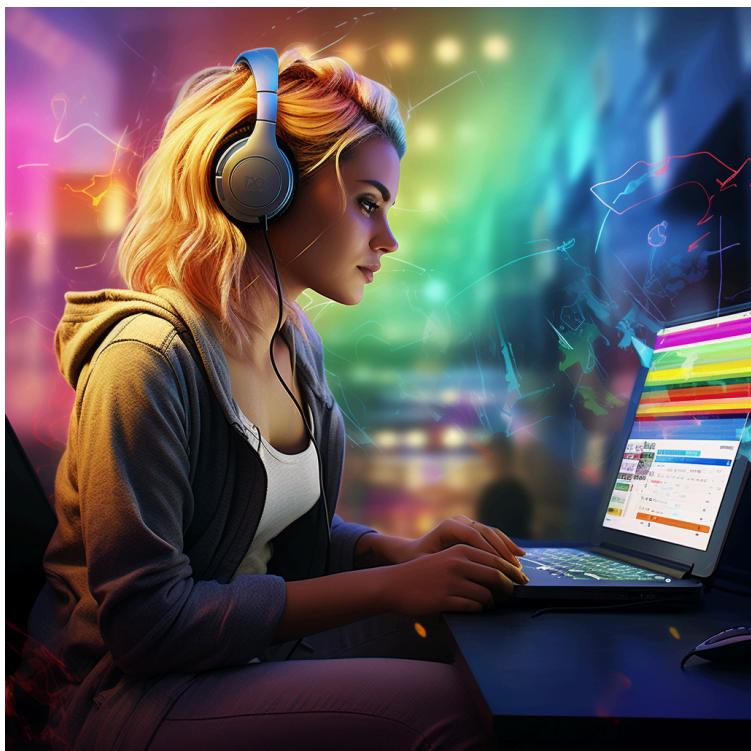
She wonders if she should say that to the team, but decides against it.

"What if I could make them see that this way of working is pointless?". Isabella decides to leave the office early to start a little side project. "Oh great, we just had a planning and now we're already having to change our capacity?" she hears Reha mumble half jokingly half serious on her way out.

When she's home she immediately sits at her computer. Reha always says that the points represent effort, not time. But then we plan based on this, so it's related to time anyway. Logic tells us, high-effort things should take longer than low-effort things. "Let's see if I can correlate those Story Points with the time the items actually took to complete".

She puts on her headphones, starts some Daft Punk, opens her IDE, and starts to type in code.

After 1 hour she looks at a diagram that leaves her stunned.



# NONSENSE

## Chapter 4

"This doesn't make any sense. How come nobody noticed that? Let me check other teams...". Isabella was so immersed in her analysis, that she forgot to have dinner. It's this kind of flow she hasn't experienced in weeks at her workplace.

"I must show this to the team tomorrow. They won't believe this"

"This is nonsense. All we're doing is nonsense. Do you see these charts? It doesn't correlate at all. Of course we cannot plan anything if we're basing our assumption on random data".

Isabella is on fire, while Reha looks devastated. "It really doesn't make sense. But everybody is doing it this way? Should we improve our estimates?".

Isabella shares the charts from the other teams. For **most** of the other teams, they look similarly random. Only 2 teams seem to have managed to figure out how estimates work. "Look, they seem to have only small items and the amount of time it takes to get them done is correlating with their estimates".

Both Reha and Isabella sit in silence glancing at the charts on the wall for a while.  
"Any ideas?" Reha asks with both hope and resignation in her voice.

"I just realized, I know the data scientist on one of the teams, I'll just go and ask Andy about it. Maybe he can share their secret".



# ALTERNATIVES

## Chapter 5

"Andy! Why do your teams' estimate correlate with the time it takes to finish them? How are you doing that? I ran an analysis on our team and it looks like our estimates in points are all but accurate. In fact, it's the case for most teams in this company. Yours is one of only two where there is a correlation".

Andy hasn't even sat down yet, he's still standing in front of a chair with a mug of coffee in his hand and a big smile on his face. "Let me guess, the other team where correlates are the 'Boogey Woogies'?"

Isabella nods and doesn't say anything, but her facial expression clearly communicates "How the heck did you know that?".

"That was my former team. The way we worked sucked, it was draining, no fun at all. And while it looked data-driven from the outside, it wasn't at all. It was just some mumbo jumbo numbers".

Andy goes along explaining what they started doing, relentlessly breaking down items till they are doable in a very short amount of time and not working on more than 5 things in parallel. And how they soon stopped using points for estimates.

"Oh we're just saying whether it's really small or regular small, and then we just add the story point number to be either 1 or 3...so we don't get questions from the PMO".

While Andy waves his curly hair out his face, he continues to explain. It's a 10-minute monologue, including things like "age", batch sizes, and how a full highway makes every car go slow.

Isabella is having problems following along. Apparently, her face gives away that she's puzzled.

"Maybe try introducing some of the concepts in a game, you can run it with your team and it should help you experience this way of working before you make radical changes" Andy proposes.



# SIMULATION THEORY - PART 1

## Chapter 6

Isabella is still trying to comprehend everything she just heard. While it did not make a lot of sense to her, there must be something about this way of working. She couldn't help but notice that Andy was smiling constantly while explaining how they work, and the more he talked the more enthusiastic he got.

When she's thinking about work, a lot happens but she's pretty sure smiles and enthusiasm are not part of that.

She goes to grab lunch with Reha, explaining what she heard from Andy.

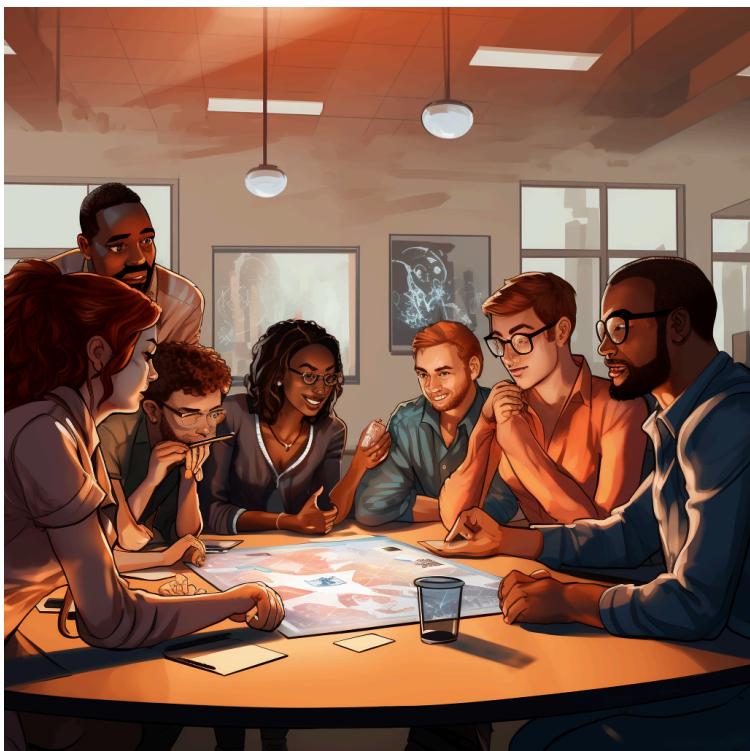
"Let's try this with our team!", Reha says excitedly. "We have our 'Let's Play' session on Friday. Why don't we try it as part of this? The worst that could happen is that nobody likes it and we keep doing the same thing as we're doing now...".

It's Friday afternoon, and the team has gathered in the meeting room "Eagle". Reha starts welcoming everyone: "Hi all, I know it's been a stressful week for you. Weeks actually. We hope with this session we can take some of it away, we're going to play a game".

The excitement starts building, everyone in the team could use some fun right now. "Isabella brought something interesting to my attention, so we'll run an experiment by playing a game about how we work".

The excitement is gone. "A game about how we work? You could not find something that is more lame, could you?" Hiroshi exclaims.

"Let's give it a try", Lorenzo weighs in.



# SIMULATION THEORY - PART 2

## Chapter 6

Isabella starts explaining "We create 2 teams. Each team's goal is to make sure we're getting as much work done as possible. People have their field of expertise, where they are working faster, but they can also help out in other areas. The winning team gets a 100\$ budget to refill our team fridge next week!"

"I found this brewery last week that makes awesome IPAs, I would love to get some of that into the fridge" Ewelina shouts. "I'm Team Ewelina" Allen follows. Those two love to talk about beer while drinking some.

"Oh come on, you young people with your hipster beers. Everyone that likes good old lager join my team" Philippe counters while rolling his eyes.

Once the teams are formed, the game starts.

"The first round is a practice round. The second one is where it counts" Reha explains while the first discussions in the teams start.

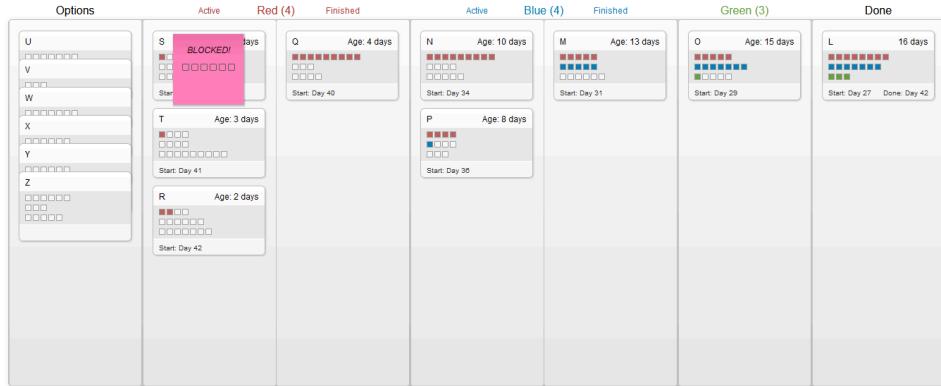
"Well that's frustrating, this looks like...our board?" Lorenzo starts the debrief of the practice round. "Maybe that's just the best way to deal with work" Philippe adds.

Isabella smiles, before adding "The definition of insanity is trying the same thing and expecting a different result," she immediately is reminded of her favourite NFL Team, but then continues: "I was reading about some techniques to improve how we work, and while I want to spare you the details, I encourage you to try the following things in the second round: Focus on getting items done, instead of starting new ones. The longer an item is in progress, the more people should focus on it. And agree on the total number of items that should be worked on and try not to go over this. Have fun in round two, now it counts!"

"Ok that's interesting, that felt like it was a lot better. Managing to close one or two items every round was motivating. I know it's just a game and not actual work that was done, but still." - Hiroshi is excited.

Nodding is visible across the room. "But in real life, we cannot switch back and forth between items every day. That would be too much context switching right? I'm not sure we can replicate this exactly for our work..."

Reha agrees with Philippe's statement: "You're right, but we can certainly try this and see what would work for us. And you're just annoyed you gotta drink some of this IPA next week instead of your beloved Lager...".



# CLEAR LANGUAGE

## Chapter 7

It's one month after the team had their Let's Play session and they started to limit how much they work on and that they try not to leave items open for too long. And while this has improved how they work and they also got some positive feedback from their stakeholders, some issues are still persisting.

"Our dailies are still not really useful in my view" Ewelina shares. "We're still talking a lot about story points and I cannot give anyone a meaningful date for when we'll be done with our feature" Allen adds.

Reha exclaims: "We started with having 'A new Hope', however, it seems like 'The Empire Strikes Back' now. So how can we make sure we end it like in 'Return of the Jedi'?"  
She's confronted with confused looks. "Star Wars ANYONE?!".

"I think I know what you mean Reha, but it would be nice if you could use language that everyone understands without having to watch 9h of movies..." Ewelina replies.

"Let's focus on the positive though, we're getting better, and work is indeed more fun. Let's use the next retro to find ways to improve further" Allen suggests.

Later that day, Isabella is waiting for the metro to arrive and her mind is running. 'Use language that everybody understands' is stuck with her. She took "lessons" from Andy to understand better what they are doing. She learned about "metrics of flow". Work in Progress, Work Item Age, Throughput, and Cycle Time. But she struggles to understand them. And she doesn't think she could explain them to her team either.

"Having metrics forced on them without them being fully understood will not help" she thinks..." if only I could easily explain them".



# THE FRIDGE - PART 1

## Chapter 8

Once Isabella reaches home, she spots yet again a banana that started to turn brownish. "Good thing the bananas are making it visible that they are about to go bad," she thinks. She opens the fridge to see what's there for dinner. "If only it wouldn't be so full, it would be a lot easier to choose what to eat. What's about to expire? WAIT A MINUTE" she exclaims.

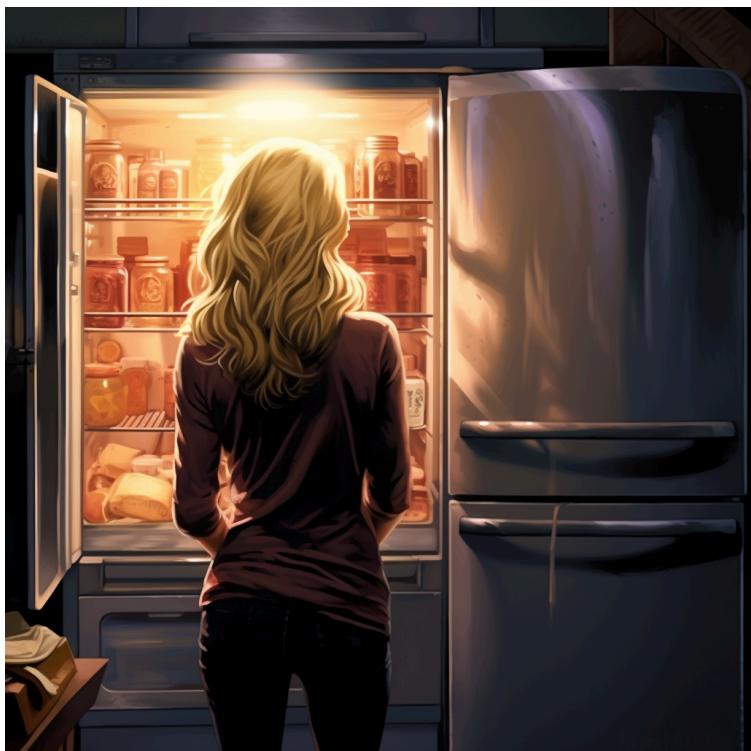
"That's it. The fridge! The expiration dates! That's how to explain it".

Our process is like a fridge. The items we are currently working on are like items in the fridge. If it's too full, we have a high WIP. What happens if it is too high? Most likely some items in the fridge get old, because we forget about them. What if it's too empty? We don't have enough ingredients to make a proper dinner. We neither want it too full nor too empty. We should have an idea of how much we need in the fridge to have enough until we go grocery shopping again

We can probably check how many items we've taken out of the fridge since the last time we went shopping. That's our Throughput. We could assume we need a similar amount of items this week as the last week. That can drive how much we're going to put on our grocery list.

What about Item Age? The longer something is in the fridge, the higher the chance of it becoming bad. We might not remember we have this, or we don't see it because the WIP is too high. Or we used them for something and put them back in and then forgot about it. If only all items could signal that they are old like the banana does. Not only \*after\* it's too late. Like that 'cheese,' we found last week, that indicated its age by emitting a very particular smell. We should make sure to use the items that are getting older before we use the newer items.

And ideally, we use it all at once. A small cup and a large cup of yogurt have the same expiry date, so I should only buy a large one if I know I can consume it till the expiry date. Otherwise going for the small one reduces the chances of it going bad.



# THE FRIDGE - PART 2

## Chapter 8

Cycle Time is the amount of time each item has spent in the fridge. On its own that might not be very relevant, but what if look at it for a certain amount of time. We could most likely read how long items tend to be in the fridge. If I knew that there was an 85% chance that we use something within 7 days or less, I can safely buy items that expire within 7 days as it's likely they'll be consumed by then. That's cost-effective and helps to reduce food waste.

"Ok, I think I understand" Isabella's partner Kim goes. Isabella prepared dinner - Risotto all Amarone - and they are discussing whether the analogy makes sense.

"So you're saying, if we have too many items in the fridge, there is a higher chance that we cannot use something and then it goes bad. Also, we should rather buy small portions instead of big ones, so we can consume it in 'one go' instead of putting it back in the fridge, right?" Kim is asking.

"Exactly. Of course, if you know you have people over for dinner you might buy more to accommodate for this. But then you are fairly certain that more people will be 'working' on reducing this item of food". Kim nods in agreement.

"Great, if I could make it simple enough for you to understand, I'm sure the folks in the office will get it too" Isabella jokes while taking the last bite of her Risotto.



# DATA DRIVEN

## Chapter 9

"So it means we can check the age of the items and discuss this in the daily? Instead of asking what people were working on yesterday, we try to find the banana that is about to go bad?" Ewelina asks with excitement. "Exactly, maybe we can even color the items based on their age... as the banana does". Reha answers with a smile.

"And instead of discussing estimates, we're just making sure we're working on the smallest possible things and we try to close them right away?" Lorenzo wonders. Everyone nods, and he adds "How do we know something is small enough?".

"We could just ask ourselves if we are comfortable finishing this item in 4 days or less. If yes, we're good. If not, we can either try to make it smaller or we need to make sure we have friends over that help us with eating, I mean finishing this item" Isabella proposes.

"Throughput is a good input for our Sprint Plannings, we can simply check our historical throughput and plan based on this" Hiroshi adds.

"If you tell me now how we can also start predicting when our features are done, you've made my week," Allen says.

"Hmm at least for single items we can use our historical cycle time. So if the Boogey Woogies want to know when this bug is fixed, we can give them a number with 85% certainty. This is not perfect, but I think it's a start" Philippe adds.

Isabella smiles, it's been a while since the full team was so engaged in a discussion. Everyone is excited to try these things out and see if they can make further improvements to how they work.



# SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT

## Chapter 10

It's been 2 months since Isabella introduced the flow metrics to the team with the help of the fridge analogy.

She's still meeting with Andy on a regular base to ask him questions and to share what they've tried. For the session they have his afternoon, she recreates the diagrams that she made when it all started, correlating their cycle times with their point estimates. They look very similar to Andy's teams now, almost only "small" items and they are all done within a very short amount of time, with a few outliers.

The team naturally started changing their refinements and instead of estimating points, now they use colors:

- Green means they feel confident to manage this item in 4 days or less
- Orange means that they feel it's doable, but there is some risk, and/or they should make sure to pair up from the beginning
- Red means that it's unlikely to hit this target and they try to make it smaller if possible or swarm it with the full team when they start working on it

Hiroshi wrote a script that will fill in the story point column based on the color, green is 1, orange is 3, and red is 8. That way they don't get any questions but they also don't have to waste time on it.

In their dailies, they look at a board and try to "identify the bananas". Instead of talking about dull things, they create plans on how to get items done before "the item goes bad".

Philippe wrote an extension to color the cards on their board based on their age. "You can be happy I don't have a device that produces the smell of cheese that went bad, otherwise I would use this". The team indeed is happy that this doesn't exist, as they would not put it beyond Philippe to actually follow through with this.

Their Sprint Reviews are going a lot better now. This is mainly because they manage most of the time to reach their goals. The new investors and Andrea even join occasionally and ask questions about their roadmap. Even though Allen still cannot give precise dates for when features will be done, they share their predictions based on the team's throughput in the reviews.

After the review, the team invites everybody to stay around, have a chat, and enjoy a beer. Ewelina and Allen happily share which region the hops of the beer they are just drinking is coming from. Andrea acts like she's interested until she interrupts them asking "Why are there post-its with a date on every beer?". "How else would we track how long the beers stay in the fridge?" the team responds in unison.



# A TRIP TO MONTE CARLO, ANYONE?

## Chapter 11

It's been some time since Techstravaganza introduced flow metrics. It's not something that every team has started to incorporate. Reha started organizing sessions on Thursday evenings, where they invite people to have a beer at their team fridge while also elaborating on the different metrics and how to use them.

Every team is free to choose how they want to implement this, some teams still like to use points for estimation instead of using colors. Luckily nobody managed to build the "smells like cheese" machine yet.

Lorenzo is just explaining to a new joiner of another time what the charts with the percentile mean on their fridge when Hiroshi enters the team room. He was just at a conference in Zürich and was part of a workshop with LetPeopleWork.  
He goes straight to Isabella and Reha and says something about Hurricane forecasting and simulations and that this changes everything.

"Where is Allen? I have the answer. Monte Carlo. We should try Monte Carlo."

And then he opens Lighthouse on his laptop...



# FLOW METRIC CHEAT SHEET

**WORK IN PROGRESS**

ITEM WAS STARTED BUT NOT FINISHED

**THROUGHPUT**

ALL ITEMS THAT WERE CLOSED IN A SPECIFIC PERIOD  
OF TIME (E.G. ON SPECIFIC DAY OR WEEK)

**WORK ITEM AGE**

TIME (E.G. DAYS) AN ITEM IS IN PROGRESS  
(DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TODAY AND STARTED DAY  
PLUS 1)

**CYCLE TIME**

TIME (E.G. DAYS) AN ITEM WAS IN PROGRESS  
(DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FINISHED DATE AND STARTED  
DATE PLUS 1)



## NOTES

# WORK IN PROGRESS (WIP)



The number of work items started but not finished



How many Items are in your fridge?



How many Items are "in progress"

What is started but not finished

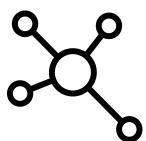


We count items independent of their size



What happens when the fridge is too full (WIP too high)?

What if WIP is very low?



How is WIP connected to the other Flow Metrics?

What other metric is affected if we have a high or low WIP?



## NOTES

# THROUGHPUT



The number of work items finished per unit of time.



How many items do you take out of your fridge?

2 per day

11 per week

...



How many items do we finish?

7 per Week

15 per Sprint

...

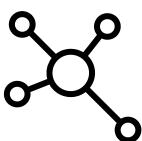


The measurement of throughput is the exact count of work items.



What happens if we don't take out any items of the fridge  
(no/low throughput)?

What's the consequence of taking out a lot of items?



How is Throughput connected to the other Flow Metrics?

What other metric is affected if we have a high or low Throughput?

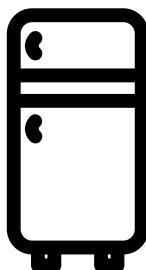


## NOTES

# WORK ITEM AGE (WIA)



The amount of elapsed time between when a work item started and the current time.



The longer something is in the fridge, the more likely it is to become expired. It makes sense to focus on the older items, as the chance that they become expired is higher.

Unless you plan to prepare dinner for many people, it makes sense to buy small portions instead of big ones. Whether you buy 200g or 1kg of Chicken, it expires at the same day.

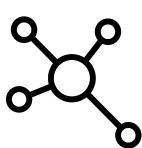


How long items are in progress already  
If your item is "big", it tends to age more



What happens if we let some items a very long time in the fridge? (High WIA)

What's an easy way to prevent items to age?



How is Work Item Age connected to the other Flow Metrics?

What other metric is affected if items have a high WIA?

共同  
大鐘  
43  
歲

ducer:  
Krzysztof Kotas  
otowska 15  
mierowo, Poland  
aron.pl

Store in a cool and dry place.

13/12/2014



Net weight:

100 g / 3.53 oz

Best before: (D/M/Y): /此日期前最佳(日/月/年):

**Milk Chocolate**

Ingredients: sugar, cocoa butter, cocoa mass, whey powder, vegetable fat, skimmed milk powder, milk fat, emulsifiers (soy lecithin, E476), flavouring. Cocoa mass 25% minimum. Contains vegetable fats in addition to cocoa butter. Contains: soy, milk. May contain traces of peanuts, tree nuts (Hazelnuts, Almonds), other nuts, eggs and wheat (gluten).

Nutrition Facts:		
Per 100g		
Energy	520	Kcal
Protein	3.7	g
Total Fat	29.8	g
- Saturated Fat	19.6	g
- Trans fat	0.5	g
Carbohydrates	59.3	g
- dietary fibre	0	g
- sugars	49.5	g
Sodium	87.2	mg



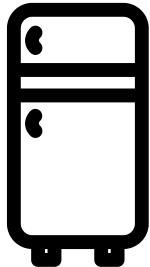
WOAKAMKURHRAK, CC BY-SA 3.0 <[HTTPS://CREATIVECOMMONS.ORG/LICENSES/BY-SA/3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)>, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

## NOTES

# CYCLE TIME



The amount of elapsed time between when a work item started and when a work item finished.



How long tend items to stay in the fridge. When you know that 85% of all the items are taken out within 5 days, you have a good idea how long the items you buy should at least last. Also it's a good indication on when you have to plan your next trip to the grocery store.



How long does it take till you finish an item after it started:

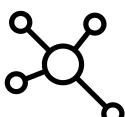
95% of all items are done in 23 days or less  
85% of all items are done in 16 days or less



The current "Work Item Age" becomes "Cycle Time" the moment we finish an item.  
A best before date applies to an item independent of its size.



Is it useful to know that 85% of all items that you start are finished within 7 days?  
What can you do with this information?



How is Work Item Age connected to the other Flow Metrics?  
What other metric is affected if items have a high WIA?

# NOTES



# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you would like to learn more about our work, we would like to point you to a couple of resources:

Let people work website:

<https://letpeople.work/>

Let people work Blogposts:

<https://blog.letpeople.work/>

Our tools:

<https://letpeople.work#tools>

To demo our lighthouse tool:

<https://demo.lighthouse.letpeople.work/>

## CONNECT WITH US:

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