

Interview transcription - 2021-03-21- 13:00 over Zoom (remote)

Speaker 0 = interviewer

Speaker 1 = interviewee

- Speaker 0 00:00:00 Recorder. Um, all right. Uh, thank you. First of all, for participating in our study, um, this conversation will be recorded and audio will later be transcribed. Um, we will remove any names or, uh, products or projects that might be mentioned, uh, due to confidentiality. And this will be shared with you, um, uh, after the transcriptions. So, um, as we briefly mentioned in our email, uh, our research is to see how use the story splitting is conducted in industry and specifically how and why perhaps it is conducted in a, your team or a company. So the goal of the interview is to get insights into how, uh, you and your team work with a user story splitting and why you do it as you do it. Um, yeah. Uh, the interview will take about an hour and we will ask some general questions about you and your company, and then we will introduce the topic and some definitions, and then we will move on to questions regarding, uh, specifically user Story splitting within your team. So, uh, first of all, um, what's, what is your current role, uh, within [COMPANY NAME] and what is your previous experience?
- Speaker 1 00:01:49 Yeah, so, um, my current role is, uh, technical director of, um, [COMPANY NAME]. Uh, so I worked a lot with the technical strategy going forward and, um, also, uh, about our development processes, how we work, uh, most effectively. Um, so, um, I, I sort of listen in to a lot of teams and their meetings and, uh, my manager is also based in the US so I'm sort of his counterpart here in Sweden, uh, for any technical issues that might arise. So, and, um, my previous, yeah, my previous experiences, uh, as a software developer, uh, so I used to work as a software developer and, uh, then I was also a project manager for several years, and I've also been, been managing one of our departments, uh, within the engineering organization.
- Speaker 0 00:02:56 All right. For how long have you been,
- Speaker 1 00:03:00 Um, it's soon, 22 years. Yeah.
- Speaker 0 00:03:10 So did I understand you correctly that you are not part of a specific team?
- Speaker 1 00:03:15 Exactly. Yeah.
- Speaker 0 00:03:19 Great. So, um, as we mentioned a little bit in our email previously, um, uh, what we mean by user stories is not necessarily what is known as the user story format, this, uh, as a user, I would like to, for some purpose, but rather use the stories in terms of work items or product backlog items. So that could be acceptance criteria, requirements, epics features, or whatever you want to call it. And by splitting, we mean that the process of dividing a, perhaps a larger task into a smaller one,
- Speaker 1 00:04:07 Right? Yeah. Yep. Yep.
- Speaker 0 00:04:11 Um, so that takes us to, uh, do you use, um, within one of your teams perhaps, or overall, uh, do you use, uh, use the stories?
- Speaker 1 00:04:30 Uh, so we use epics, um, that we break down into stories or just tasks, um, and development tasks, or just individual tasks. Um, so Epic is our sort of requirement. And then we, um, and we have, uh, acceptance criteria on the Epic level.

Um, and then we break those down into smaller pieces, as you said, We don't use that specific user story format.

- Speaker 0 00:05:15 Okay. Okay. But, um, epics then could be broken down as you say, understand that into stories or directly perhaps to tasks. Yeah.
- Speaker 1 00:05:29 Yes. Depending on how complex the Epic is or how large it is, uh, sort of, uh, we try to make the epics, uh, smaller and smaller, um, to do sort of incremental features in that sense. Um, so, um, but we don't have any sort of guidelines or tell the teams to do in a specific way. So it's more or less up to the teams, whether they want to work with, with stories and break those down into tasks, or you can just do tasks directly.
- Speaker 0 00:06:10 Uh, what do you think is the main purpose for, uh, as you say, you're, you're striving to, uh, create epics that are, uh, smaller. What, why do, why do you want to do that?
- Speaker 1 00:06:26 Um, we want to get a feature out as fast as possible. Um, so we want to slice the functionality sort of, uh, you know, yeah, vertical way, um, following the MVP principles, sort of, uh, to be able to get feedback faster, um, and, uh, not do really big features, uh, upfront. And that's why we want them as small as possible so they'll bring a lot of value.
- Speaker 0 00:07:01 Okay. Okay. So is this, is this something that you feel since you are experienced within the company, is this something that you feel has been a progress over time to go smaller and smaller?
- Speaker 1 00:07:16 Yes, absolutely. And it's, it's something that we, uh, I actually have an, an [COMPANY NAME] analysis file tracking, uh, how long, uh, in average, an Epic, uh, takes for us to complete, so that something that we look into and, uh, and see if it sort of increases or decreases over time. But, and so I know that they are getting smaller.
- Speaker 0 00:07:42 Okay. Um, have you, uh, when you're using that tool, have you ever, um, have you ever found a, a trend that was not positive and done something about that trend or has it,
- Speaker 1 00:08:01 I think we kind of stabilized around a specific size now than the last couple of yeah. Six months or so. Um, but when I initially sort of created that analysis, it was mostly to bring awareness and, and show some facts on things that we already kind of knew what's happening. And, uh, so we had a couple of, uh, uh, really huge projects in the past that have taken a lot of time and, uh, um, just to, yeah, to sort of show some numbers and figures around that that, uh, uh, it's better to split them up and then you can deliver incrementally.
- Speaker 0 00:08:56 When do you usually do story splitting?
- Speaker 1 00:09:01 Um, so I say that is when the team sort of, uh, starts working with a specific Epic, um, and it's in their sprint planning sessions or sort of in conjunction with that. Um, I think they're typically done in smaller groups together, uh, when they sit and discuss what's going to be needed, uh, in order to complete an Epic.
- Speaker 0 00:09:39 No. Okay. Okay. Um, so, uh, do, do you ever find, do you ever see that the teams need to find out after this sprint planning that splitting might not have

been done correctly and it's necessary to split once more?

- Speaker 1 00:10:05 Yeah. I would say that sort of adding tasks and, uh, and splitting tasks into even smaller things are, that's done continuously sort of, uh, along, uh, the project, uh, ghosts. Um, I'm just thinking to myself when I'm sort of leading an initiative right now, where we are migrating our source code from subversion to GIT, um, and that's something that, so I'm sort of product managing that because it's sort of an internal project. And, uh, initially we put down a number of tasks, but as, as we progress, we see that, okay, we need to fix this as well, or we need to do that. And then we need to add those as tasks. So it's, yeah, definitely. It's, it's not something that you can just do upfront and then be happy with it. It will change.
- Speaker 0 00:11:03 Yeah. And when you add, add a task in that stage, so to speak, is it, um, is it added to an Epic, or is it
- Speaker 1 00:11:15 No, it's, it's added to the Epics, so it's connected to the Epic. Um, so we use the JIRA to track everything, so it's, it's connected there.
- Speaker 0 00:11:31 Yeah. And I assume that Jira has some functionality to connect, uh, tasks, tasks.
- Speaker 1 00:11:41 Yeah. Yeah. So, uh, each, uh, issue that it's called, um, in Jira, uh, have sort of a Epic as a parent sort of, um, so it's linked in that way. So under the Epic, you will see all the different tasks or stories or even defects that are connected to that Epic.
- Speaker 0 00:12:02 Okay. Okay. Um, and in terms of this, that you're saying that you usually do most of the work splitting an Epic at the beginning of a sprint at sprint planning, and then when necessary, uh, things are splitted, uh, continuously, um, is this, are you trying to mitigate this or is, is it, does it feel like the reality demands that's splitting whenever necessary will be done? Or are you trying to, uh, are you trying to reduce the amounts of splits after sprint planning?
- Speaker 1 00:12:55 Um, I'm not sure I understand what you're after. Uh, so I think it, yeah, go ahead.
- Speaker 0 00:13:06 Yeah. Uh, yeah, it's a little bit, uh, difficult. Uh, um, it's rather that if, if you feel that, do you feel that that progress is working, uh, working all right for you, uh, uh, splitting one sprint planning and then splitting when necessary?
- Speaker 1 00:13:31 Yes, I think so.
- Speaker 0 00:13:33 Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Um, great. And who, um, for this, uh, project, perhaps that you mentioned migrating from subversion to get, um, what, what kind of roles are involved when you're trying to split the, that?
- Speaker 1 00:14:00 So it's, uh, myself, or sort of as the project manager or the, uh, feature team lead that we call them, people are sort of a scrum master role. Um, and then the, the people who will do the actual work. So, um, in the migration, and now it's been, uh, one of the, sort of our engineering infrastructure teams, um, that are, are working with a source code repository systems and such, and we also have developers involved to be able to verify. So you can also say that yeah, the testing, um, role is needed, uh, for the validation part.
- Speaker 0 00:14:52 Okay. Okay.

- Speaker 1 00:14:54 So I think if I just think about how the sort of normal development teams would work, they would have maybe, um, maybe the feature team lead as a facilitator and doing sort of actually typing in the Jira, uh, or, uh, the developers themselves together with sort of, uh, testers, uh, UX people check column that's sort of done together.
- Speaker 0 00:15:26 Okay. Well, um, what do you think, um, what do you think is the main purpose of involving fairly many roles in a split thing in, uh, an Epic of this type?
- Speaker 1 00:15:49 I think it's sort of the, one of the main and important aspects is probably when you break it down, it will be more obvious what needs to be done. Um, so that's why you need all the different perspectives as well. Um, so everyone can have input on, um, what do you need as a team to be able to be done, you know, otherwise,
- Speaker 0 00:16:21 So each role brings a pair of eyes to the table and you see, and you're able to like what needs to be done basically since the Epic, perhaps describing every technicality from the beginning.
- Speaker 1 00:16:37 Yeah. I know the Epic won't describe what type of documentation we need or what kind of UX design we would need and sort of, yeah. So it's, it's a way to, to bring all those different perspectives into one view and also to get a better understanding on yeah. Everything that needs to be done. It's not just coding.
- Speaker 0 00:17:08 All right. Um, you mentioned previously that you, um, you, you might split, uh, vertically, um, by the MVP principal, I think you mentioned. And, uh, um, so the purpose of that, correct me if I'm wrong, but it's to keep, uh, user value to each story, perhaps. Yeah. Yeah. So is this, um, have you used any sort of, um, source for using that technique, if you know, any specific literature that you haven't used for to come up with that principal or what, what do you think it would be based on?
- Speaker 1 00:18:10 Uh, no, not that I'm aware. It's more, yeah, no, I, I cannot give any literature or it's more, um, what's known in the industry sort of, um, which I think most people have seen sort of sketches and, and images of customers asking for something, and then you deliver something completely different and it doesn't match. Uh, so that's why it's important that you try to deliver something that brings you as a value. So you can actually get customer feedback back and make sure that you solve the right problem. Um,
- Speaker 0 00:18:55 Yeah. And of course that's does not only cover the use of story splitting, uh, um, uh, perspective, but user stories, um, delivery of all kinds. Um, Uh, Um, is there any, um, do you have any thoughts about if there are any drawbacks of the way you're, you're currently doing use story splitting at the moment?
- Speaker 1 00:19:56 Uh, it's not something that I've been thinking about actively to, to change or improve. So, um, improving in other areas that are much more important right now, that's why we haven't paid so much attention to that specific part of the process.
- Speaker 0 00:20:24 For example, if, if, um, if we go back to a split thing vertically, um, have you, if you would remember, do you have ever run into an issue that might have been solved or that splitting horizontally rather, uh, might have been beneficial instead?
- Speaker 1 00:20:53 Yeah, I see what you mean, but I, from my experience, I think it

has probably for us been the other way around where we have done a lot of, or a lot of, but in several cases, at least Don more horizontal things. Uh, and then we can see afterwards that maybe that wasn't so useful, uh, I spend a lot of time on, on sort of building frameworks or foundation for stuff, and then it's only a tiny portion that's actually being used.

- Speaker 0 00:21:31 Yeah, exactly. And of course, since you are working at least in a mature company, and I would assume many teams being also mature, this, this would be what is, uh, uh, perhaps, uh, uh, Sort of the development that you would at least want to have that you're moving in directing the correct direction.
- Speaker 1 00:22:06 All right. Otherwise I think the risk you might take is that you're, you're building for that specific use case. So, uh, then you need to go back and refactor in order to sort of be able to fulfill the next use case. Uh, but to be honest, I haven't seen that as a big issue in reality, you can almost always solve it. And it's something that the engineers might feel is sort of not satisfactory to work in that way. But, uh, in reality, it's, it's very rarely a huge issue.
- Speaker 0 00:22:49 Um, Um, you mentioned a little bit about this, uh, you were using the [COMPANY NAME] analytics tool for, for, um, finding out how long time Epic took to deliver. Um, or are you doing any kind of other value evaluation of, uh, specifically use the story splitting in terms of that you, have you looked into, uh, how many times you usually split an Epic or other features?
- Speaker 1 00:23:36 We haven't? Um, no, we, we have, um, actually never looked at that. Uh, I, I remember years back, uh, we tried sort of, um, using it for measuring progress to be able to sort of predict, uh, when an Epic or supposed to be done by looking at the number of, um, sub items, uh, to call them that, um, and to see how many of those were were closed and how many remain, and, and in that sense, sort of be able to show progress. Um, but, um, we never pursued that direction, actually. It was, uh, yeah, it didn't give us the information we wanted. Anyway. It was, it was just a percentage, but it could still be that one or two of those remaining items were taking a long time. So it was, yeah, it was something, uh, a person who was introduced, interested in statistics tried to do her sort of proof of concept on, but, um, we, we never used it or, yeah.
- Speaker 0 00:24:55 Okay. Okay. So, um, that would, of course my, to have been more useful, let's say if each, uh, uh, low level task were in fact taking as much time as the other ones, so then it would be possible. So, uh, is it correct to assume that that's not your goal with splitting user stories that they should be?
- Speaker 1 00:25:31 Yes. Yeah, no, we've never had that as a goal or never discussed it in that way. So, um, I think my gut feeling without looking into the data, but is that they can range from just something that takes an hour to something that takes several weeks. It, you cannot compare them in that way, so,
- Speaker 0 00:26:04 No. Okay. Um, it's a little off scope in terms of splitting, but, uh, do you, do, do you do estimations on the tasks?
- Speaker 1 00:26:18 Yeah, so we, we do estimations on a higher level for the complete Epic, uh, and, uh, we actually set a due date where we're think we will be done

with it, uh, in order to sort of be able to plan the release and such, but, uh, those dates, uh, will change, um, continuously as well. But, uh, we, we do, we do an initial sort of, I don't know if you're familiar with t-shirt sizing sort of almost, but, uh, I don't know if it's how big it is, because that will actually influence the, the, the ranking and the priority of the epics as well. Um, so that goes into the whole planning process. So, um, but then when, when the team starts working with the Epic for real, uh, you might realize that, Oh, there are these things that we need to fix as well. And then the, the, um, we're not specifically doing a new estimation, but we are pushing that due date and into the future.

- Speaker 0 00:27:34 Okay. So, um, if we go back to, um, splitting during sprint planning, um, um, and do you remember a time when you felt that it has been done, uh, incorrectly and didn't work for some reason?
- Speaker 1 00:28:06 Um, I'm pretty sure that are those occasions as well, but, um, I think the teams then just, uh, close those issues and create new ones and, yeah, that's it. So, uh, I've never heard it sort of being a big thing.
- Speaker 0 00:28:32 And of course that's, since you are, since you've previously also said that whatever needs fixing after sprint planning will be fixed and if necessary now to split or another thing. So that's a, if it's needed to mitigate anything, you would do it if necessary. Yes.
- Speaker 1 00:28:57 Yeah. Yep, yep, yep. Yep.
- Speaker 0 00:29:01 Uh, so apart from that, do you think if something has gone wrong, is there any other impact of it, uh, that that might have been, uh, the outcome of, uh, incorrect use of sort of splitting apart from that they have to, the teams have to redo it?
- Speaker 1 00:29:39 The only thing I can think of is that if we, if the team has not had all the different perspectives in the beginning, is that we're missing something. Uh, instead of, uh, we forgot about this specific, uh, area or instead of Otherwise. No, I don't think so.
- Speaker 0 00:30:07 Oh, okay. Um, let's see here apart, uh, you briefly mentioned which might have been, uh, uh, yeah, you, you briefly mentioned that in terms of this vertical, horizontal splitting, that is two different, uh, techniques that developers might be a little bit prone to preferring horizontal development. Um, is there, um, is there anything else that you think your colleagues specifically other roles than yourself would say about how, how the process of splitting user stories works in your teams?
- Speaker 1 00:31:11 Well, I think that, um, that's a constant discussion to split it vertically and horizontally. And I think different people in different teams have different opinions there. And, uh, some people find it very easy to split it vertically and others find it more difficult to, to, or find it easy to split vertically. But the other way around is sort of more difficult for you and this is what I mean. Um, so I think that's, that's sort of a constant discussion also between the product manager or the product owner and, and the teams that are, where should we draw the line here? And, uh, so, uh, our epics are usually not that specific on each, uh, each of those sort of details. Uh, and it needs to be a discussion sort of along the project as well. And sort of, should we include this here? Or should we wait for this and how, how complicated or how, how rich should the, the

feature be in this sense? Uh, so, um, yeah, and that's why it, yeah, it depends.

- Speaker 0 00:32:30 Yeah. And, uh, also in terms of, uh, variation, it seems like, and correct me if I'm wrong here, but it seems like, uh, your respective teams are perhaps working, uh, differently with these kind of things. Um, so let's, let's say between a team team, one team two, uh, what, what could be, what would you say a difference? Uh, what, what would you say the main reasons are for it being different in different teams?
- Speaker 1 00:33:11 I think, um, the feature team lead, or our sort of project managers have a large impact on how detailed they are, but also, um, sort of the teams themselves, how they, but the culture sort of in the team is. And I think that what is different between the teams is the granularity of those different tasks or stories sort of, um, how small do they prefer them to be and sort of that's, that's something that has evolved over time, I would say. Um, and, um, so I think some teams prefer them to have to be sort of more open-ended, um, but others prefer them to be really specific. Um, so, and it also sort of comes down to how, how do you see the, the tool itself, um, does it help you to have a long list of, of items and you want to sort of tick them off by one, one by one, or do you want a fewer list, but then you, you might have, yeah. You have to keep all those details in your head somewhere else. Uh, so it's, um, yeah, I think that's, that's the biggest sort of difference between different teams. Um,
- Speaker 0 00:34:43 Okay. And considering us a central role in, in, in between all these teams and from the company perspective, would that, would it be beneficial to have the teams align with a specific way to do it or wouldn't it
- Speaker 1 00:35:06 No. As long as they deliver that's fine. So, um, yeah, no, from a company perspective, we don't want to sort of prescribe, uh, in detail, uh, how they do that breakdown. I think that that could be up to the teams to decide. Okay.
- Speaker 0 00:35:30 Hmm. Um, and, uh, I guess we are pretty much done actually. Um, we've got some really good answers and it was, uh, yeah, really interesting to hear you, uh, specifically in terms of that, this specific role that you have in between the teams. That was really interesting to hear. We, we will be, uh, interviewing a lot of different roles from developers to more direct product owners and scrum masters as well. So that was really interesting. Um, yeah. Is there anything,
- Speaker 1 00:36:33 Yeah, it's always fun with these interviews sort of, because yeah. I can only tell you what we are doing and I have been into your deal for other sort of thesis projects where they had, um, a very theoretical model about some analytics and, uh, I didn't understand anything of it. It was so far away from my reality sort of pragmatic approach. So it's like, Hmm, no, we don't use that or, Nope. I've never heard about that before. Yeah.
- Speaker 0 00:37:17 The academic
- Speaker 1 00:37:18 World is a bit different to times.
- Speaker 0 00:37:22 Yeah, it is very much so. Um, yeah. Um, but, uh, yeah. Great. And thank you again for, um, for, uh, participating. Um, we will, um, once we have something more concrete, we will forward it to you. So you're able to comment on if there is anything to comment on.
- Speaker 1 00:38:00 I'm looking forward to that. Yeah.

- Speaker 0 00:38:05 Um, a quick of recording.