Why are industrial agile teams using metrics and how do they use them?

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ABSTRACT

Agile development methods are increasing in popularity, yet there are limited studies on the reasons and use of metrics in industrial agile development. This paper presents preliminary results from a systematic literature review. Based on our study, metrics and their use is focused to the following areas: Iteration planning, Iteration tracking, Motivating and improving, Identifying process problems, Pre-release quality, Post-release quality and Changes in processes or tools. The findings are mapped against agile principles and it seems that the use of metrics supports the principles with some deviations. Surprisingly, we find little evidence of the use of code metrics. Also, we note that there is a lot of evidence on the use of planning and tracking metrics. Finally, the use of metrics to motivate and enforce process improvements as well as applicable quality metrics can be interesting future research topics.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.4 [**Information Systems Applications**]: Miscellaneous; D.2.8 [**Software Engineering**]: Metrics—*agile metrics*

General Terms

Measurement

Keywords

agile software development, metrics, measurement

1. INTRODUCTION

Software metrics have been studied for decades and several literature reviews have been published. Yet, the literature reviews have been written from an academic viewpoint that typically focuses on the effectiveness of a single metric. For example, Catal et al. review fault prediction metrics [2], Purao et al. review metrics for object oriented systems [33] and Kitchenham performs a mapping of most cited software metrics papers [20]. To our knowledge there are no systematic literature reviews on the actual use of software metrics in the industry.

Agile software development is becoming increasing popular in the software industry. The agile approach seems to be contradicting with the traditional metrics approaches. For example, the agile emphasizes working software over measuring progress in terms of intermediate products or documentation, and embracing the change invalidates the traditional approach of tracking progress against pre-made plan. However, at the same time agile software development highlights some measures that should be used, e.g., burndown graphs and 100% automated unit testing coverage. However, measurement research in the context of agile methods remains scarce.

The goal of this paper is to review the literature of actual use of software metrics in the context of agile software development. This study will lay out the current state of metrics usage in industrial agile software development based on literature. Moreover, the study uncovers the reasons for metric usage as well as highlights actions that the use of metrics can trigger. In this paper, we cover the following research questions: Why are metrics used?, What actions do the use of metrics trigger? and Which metrics are used?

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes how the SR was conducted. Section 3 reports the results from the study. Section 4 discusses about the findings and how they map to agile principles. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. REVIEW METHOD

Systematic review (SR) was chosen as research method because we are trying to understand a problem instead of trying to find a solution to it. Also, there was already existing literature that could be synthesized.

2.1 Protocol development

Kitchenham's guide for SRs [19] was used as a basis for developing the review protocol. Additionally, a SR on agile development [7] and a SR on SR [21] were used to further understand the challenges and opportunities of SRs. The protocol was also iterated in weekly meetings with the authors, as well as in a pilot study.

2.2 Search and selection process

The strategy for finding primary studies was following:

WETSoM '14 Hyderabad, India

Table 1: Paper selection funnel

Phase	Amount of papers
Phase 1	774
Phase 2	163
Phase 3	29

- Stage 1: Automated search
- Stage 2: Selection based on title and abstract
- Stage 3: Selection based on full text. Conduct data extraction and quality assessment.

Table 1 shows the selection funnel in terms of the number of papers after each stage.

Scopus database [1] was used to find the primary documents with automated search. Keywords include popular agile development methods and synonyms for the word metric. The search was improved incrementally in three phases because we noticed some key papers and XP conferences were not found initially. The search strings, hits and dates can be found from appendix A.

The selection of the primary documents was based on an inclusion criteria: *papers that present empirical findings on the industrial use and experiences of metrics in agile context.* The papers were excluded based on multiple criteria, mainly due to not conforming our requirements regarding empirical findings, agile and industrial context, and the quality of the results. Full criteria are listed in appendix B.

In stage 1, Scopus was used as the only search engine as it contained the most relevant databases IEEE and ACM. Also, it was able to find Agile and XP conference papers. Only XP Conference 2013 was searched manually because it couldn't be found through Scopus.

In stage 2, papers were included and excluded by the first author based on their title and abstract. As the quality of abstracts can be poor in computer science [19], full texts were also skimmed through in case of unclear abstracts. Unclear cases were discussed among researchers in weekly meetings and an exclusion rule was documented if necessary.

The validity of the selection process was analysed by performing the selection for a random sample of 26 papers also by the second author. The level of agreement was 'substantial' with Kappa 0.67 [23].

Stage 3 included multiple activities in one work flow. Selection by full text was done, data was coded and quality assessment was done. Once again, if there were unclear papers, they were discussed in meetings. Also, selection of 7 papers was conducted by the second author with an 'almost perfect' agreement, Kappa 1.0 [23].

2.3 Data extraction

Integrated coding was selected for data extraction strategy [4]. It provided focus to research questions but flexibility regarding findings. Deductive coding would have been too restraining and inductive coding might have caused too much bias. Integrated coding made it possible to create a sample list of code categories: Why is measurement used?, How is measurement used? and Metrics.

The coding started with the first author reading the full text and marking interesting quotes with a temporary code.

[1]http://www.scopus.com

Table 2: Publication distribution of primary studies

Publication channel	Type	#	%
Agile Conference	Conference	8	38
HICCS	Conference	3	14
ICSE SDG	Workshop	2	10
XP Conference	Conference	2	10
Agile Development Conference	Conference	1	5
APSEC	Conference	1	5
ASWEC	Conference	1	5
Elektronika ir Elektrotechnika	Journal	1	5
Empirical Software Engineering	Journal	1	5
EUROMICRO	Conference	1	5
ICSE	Conference	1	5
ICSP	Conference	1	5
IST	Journal	1	5
IJPQM	Journal	1	5
JSS	Journal	1	5
PROFES	Conference	1	5
Software - Prac. and Exp.	Journal	1	5
WETSoM	Workshop	1	5

After, reading the full text first author checked each quote and coded again with an appropriate code based on the built understanding. In weekly meetings, we slowly built a rule set for collecting metrics:

- Collect metric only if team or company uses it.
- Don't collect metrics that are only used for the comparison and selection of development methods.
- Don't collect metrics that are primarily used to compare teams.
- Collect metric only if something is said about why it is used or what actions it causes.

Atlas.ti Visual QDA(Qualitative Data Analysis), version 7.1.x was used to collect and synthesize the qualitative data.

To evaluate the repeatability of finding the same metrics, second author coded metrics from three papers. Capture-recapture method [34] was then used which showed that 90% of metrics were found.

A quality assessment form adopted from [7] was used to evaluate the quality of each primary study.

2.4 Data synthesis

Data synthesis followed the steps recommended by Cruzes et al. [4]. Process started by going through all quotes within one code and giving each quote a more descriptive code describing the quote in high level. Then the descriptive codes were organized in groups based on their similarity. These groups were then given a high level code which are seen as categories in table 5.

3. RESULTS

This chapter presents the preliminary results from the systematic literature review. Table 2 shows the distribution of primary documents by publication channels. Table 3 lists the distribution of agile methods and Table 4 lists the distribution of domains.

Categories for the reasons and the use of measurements are listed in table 5. The following chapters will describe each category in more detail.

Table 3: Distribution of agile methods

Agile method	Amount
Scrum	15
XP	7
Lean	5
Other	5

Table 4: Distribution of domains

Domain	Amount
Telecom	10
Enterprise information system	7
Web application	4
Other	11

Table 5: Categories for measurement usage

Categories	Sources
Iteration planning	[8, 32, 3, 10, 15, 24, 12, 14]
Iteration tracking	[31, 40, 24, 6, 15, 5, 9, 8, 25, 41, 42, 13, 38, 35, 32, 10, 30]
Motivating and improving	[41, 39, 17, 5, 3, 32, 38, 40]
Identifying process problems	[31, 41, 25, 17, 38, 24, 29, 36, 26, 43, 28]
Pre-release quality	[18, 18, 6, 41]
Post-release quality	[29, 3, 9, 38]
Changes in processes or tools	[17, 31, 26, 5, 38, 18, 37, 30]

3.1 Iteration planning

Many metrics were used to support iteration planning. The metrics were used for task prioritization and scoping of the iteration.

Many metrics were focused to help in the prioritization of the tasks for the next iteration [10, 12, 14]. Prioritization of features was affected by a metric that measured the amount of revenue a customer is willing to pay for a feature [14].

Effort estimation metrics were used to measure the size of the features [8]. Furthermore, velocity metrics were used to calculate how many features is the team able to complete in an iteration [32]. Knowing the teams' effective available hours was found useful when selecting tasks for an iteration [3]. Velocity metrics were also used to improve the next iteration estimates [24]. In one case, task's start and end date metric was used to point out interdependent tasks in the planning phase [15].

3.2 Iteration tracking

Purpose of iteration tracking was to track how the tasks selected for the iteration were performed and that necessary modifications were done to the plan to complete the iteration according to schedule.

Metrics helped in monitoring, identifying problems, and predicting the end result by making it transparent to the stakeholders how the iteration is progressing [31, 40, 24, 6, 15, 9, 41, 42].

Progress metrics included number of completed web pages [15], story completion percentage [41] and velocity metrics [6]. However, using velocity metrics had also negative effects such as cutting corners in implementing features to maintain velocity with the cost of quality [8]. One qualitative progress metric was product demonstrations with customer [42]. Measuring the completion of tasks enabled selecting incomplete tasks to the next iteration [15].

When the metrics indicated, during an iteration, that all planned tasks could not be completed, the iteration was rescoped by cutting tasks [24, 6, 25] or adding extra resources [6, 25].

When there were problems that needed to be fixed, whether they were short or long term, the metrics helped in making decisions to fix them [38, 6, 31, 5]. It was possible to base decisions on data, not only use common sense and experience [39]. Balance of work flow was mentioned as a reason for using metrics in multiple papers [32, 29, 30, 10, 31, 6, 17]. Progress metrics were used to focus work on tasks that matter the most [39], avoid partially done work [35], avoid task switching [35] and polishing of features [39]. Finally, open defects metric was used to delay a release [13].

3.3 Motivating and improving

This section describes metrics that were used to motivate people and support team level improvement of working practices and performance.

Metrics were used to communicate different data about the project or product to the team members [41, 39, 32, 38, 40]. Measurement data motivated teams to act and improve their performance [39, 32, 3, 5, 17]. Some examples included fixing the build faster by visualizing build status [17, 5], fixing bugs faster by showing amount of defects in monitors [3] and increasing testing by measuring product size by automated tests that motivated team to write more tests [39].

Metrics were also used to prevent harmful behaviour such as cherry picking features that are most interesting to the team. Measuring work in progress (WIP) and setting WIP limits prevented cherry picking by enforcing only two features at a time and thus preventing them from working on lower priority but more interesting features [25].

3.4 Identifying process problems

Metrics were often used to identify or avoid problems in processes and work flows. This chapter describes how metrics were used to spot problems.

There were multiple cases highlighting how metrics are used to identify or predict problems in order to solve or avoid them [31, 41, 24, 29, 36, 26, 43].

Sometimes there were work phases where no value was added, e.g., "waiting for finalization". This type of activity was called waste and was identified by using lead time [28].

Story implementation flow metric describes how efficiently a developer has been able to complete a story compared to the estimate [17]. This metric helped to identify a problem with receiving customer requirement clarifications.

Creating awareness with defect trend indicator helped to take actions to avoid problems [38]. One common solution to problems was to find the root cause [17, 25].

3.5 Pre-release quality

Metrics in the pre-release quality category were used to prevent defects reaching customers and to understand what was the current quality of the product.

Integration fails was a problem to avoid with static code check metrics [18]. Moreover, metrics were used to make sure that the product is sufficiently tested before the next step in the release path [18][6]. Additionally, making sure that the product is ready for further development was mentioned [9].

Some metrics forced writing tests before the actual code [41]. Technical debt was measured with a technical debt board that was used to facilitate discussion on technical debt issues [5].

3.6 Post-release quality

Metrics in post-release quality deal with evaluating the quality of the product after it has been released.

Customer satisfaction, customer responsiveness, and quality indicators were seen as attributes of post-release quality. Some metrics included customer input to determine post-release quality [29, 9, 3] while other metrics used pre-release data as predictors of post-release quality [38, 29, 9]. Customer related metrics included, e.g., defects sent by customers[3], change requests from customers [29] and customer's willingness to recommend product to other potential customers [9]. Quality prediction metrics included defect counts [29], maintenance effort [38] and deferred defect counts [9].

3.7 Changes in processes or tools

This chapter describes the reported changes that applying metrics had for processes and tools. The changes include changes in measurement practices, development policies, and the whole development process.

The successful usage of sprint readiness metric and story flow metric changed company policy to have target values for both metrics as well as monthly reporting of both metrics by all projects [17].

At Ericsson by monitoring the flow of requirements metric they decided to change their implementation flow from push to pull to help them deliver in a more continuous manner. Also, based on the metric they added an intermediate release version to have release quality earlier in the development cycle [30].

Changes to requirements management were also made based on lead time in other case at Ericsson. Analysing lead time contributed to delaying technical design after purchase order was received, providing customer a rough estimate quickly and merging the step to create solution proposal and technical design [26].

Problem with broken build, and the long times to fix the build, led to measurements that monitor and visualize the state of the build and the time it takes to fix it [5, 17, 18].

Also, additional code style rules were added to code check-in and build tools so that builds would fail more often and defects would get caught before release [17, 18].

Similarly, testing approaches were changed based on flow metrics. Using lead time led to that integration testing could be started parallel to system testing [26]. Also, throughput of a test process showed insufficient capability to handle the incoming features, which led to changing the test approach [37].

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Implications for practice

To provide implications to practice we map our findings to the principles of agile software development [1] categorized by Patel & al. [27]. For each paragraph we use the naming by Patel et al. and provide references to the agile practices by numbers.

Communication and Collaboration (principles 4 and 6) was reflected in metrics that motivated a team to act and improve, see section 3.3. Also, progress metrics were used to communicate the status of the project to the stakeholders, see section 3.2.

Team involvement (5,8) was reflected in metrics that motivated team to act and improve, see section 3.3. Also, to promote sustainable development metrics were targeted to balance the flow of work, see section 3.2.

Reflection (12) was visible in metrics that were used to identify problems and to change processes, see section 3.4 and section 3.7.

Frequent delivery of working software (1,3,7) was directly identified in one paper, where the team measured progress by demonstrating the product to the customer [42]. Additionally, there were cases where e.g. completed web-pages [15] were the primary progress measure. Also, many metrics focused on progress tracking and timely completion of the iteration, see section 3.2. However, some other measures from section 3.2 show that instead of working code agile teams followed completed tasks and velocity metrics.

An integral part of the concept of working software is measuring post-release quality, see section 3.6. This was measured by customer satisfaction, feedback, and customer defect reports. It was also common to use pre-release data to predict post-release quality. Agile developers tend to measure the end product quality with customer based metrics instead of the traditional quality models, such as ISO/IEC 25010 [16].

Managing Changing Requirements (2) was seen in the

metrics that support prioritization of features each iteration, see section 3.1. Additionally, different metrics helped keeping the internal quality of the product high throughout the development which then provided safe development of modifications from new ideas, see section 3.5.

Design (9,10,11) was seen in focus to measuring technical debt and using metrics to enforce writing tests before actual code, see section 3.5. Additionally, the status of build was continuously monitored, see section 3.7. However, the use of velocity metric had a negative effect on technical quality, see section 3.2. Many metrics focused on making sure that the right features were selected for implementation, see section 3.1, thus avoiding unnecessary work.

There were also metrics, or their usage, which were not agile in nature. E.g., maintaining velocity by cutting corners in quality instead of dropping features from that iteration [8]. Also, adding people to project to reach a certain date [6, 25] doesn't seem that agile compared to removing tasks. Adding people can have a negative impact to progress, considering the lack of knowledge and training time required. Moreover, the use of dates to plan interdependent tasks is not agile in nature [15]. Instead, interdependencies should be visible in choosing the tasks to appropriate iterations. Also, the use of number of defects to delay a release [13] is against agile thinking as one should rather decrease the scope to avoid such a situation.

Some agile metrics that work well for an agile team, such as tracking progress by automated tests [39], or measuring the status of the build [18] can turn against the agile principles if used as an external controlling mechanism. The fifth agile principle requires trust in the team, but if the metrics are enforced outside of the team, e.g., from upper management there is a risk that the metrics turn into control mechanisms and the benefits for the team itself suffer.

4.2 Comparison to prior studies

Only few papers have broadly studied the reasons for software metrics use in the context of agile software development. Hartmann & Dymond [11] also highlight process improvement as one of the reasons for measurement in their agile metrics paper. Also, they emphasize that creation of value should be the primary measure of progress - which was also seen in our study.

Korhonen [22] found in her study that traditional defect metrics could be reused in agile context - if modified. Defect metrics were also used in many of the primary studies.

Kitchenham's mapping study [20] identified several code metrics in academic literature. However, in our study we found almost no evidence of code metric use in the agile industrial context. Maybe agile practitioners consider code metrics self-evident and don't report them, or maybe code metrics aren't widely used by agile industrial teams.

4.3 Limitations

The large shares of specific application domains in the primary documents is a threat to external validity. Seven out of 29 studies were from enterprise information systems domain and especially strong was also the share of ten telecom industry studies out of which eight were from the same company, Ericsson. Also, Israeli Air Force was the case organization in three studies.

The threats to reliability in this research include mainly issues related to the reliability of primary study selection and data extraction. The main threat to reliability was having a single researcher performing the study selection and data extraction. It is possible that researcher bias could have had an effect on the results. This threat was mitigated by analysing the reliability of both study selection and data extraction as described in section 2.

Due to iterative nature of the coding process, it was challenging to make sure that all previously coded primary documents would get the same treatment, whenever new codes were discovered. In addition, the first author's coding "sense" developed over time, so it is possible that data extraction accuracy improved during the analysis. In order to mitigate these risks we conducted a pilot study in order to improve the coding scheme, get familiar with the research method, refine the method and tools.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This paper we present the preliminary results from a systematic literature review from 29 primary studies. To our knowledge there is no previous systematic reviews of measurement use in the context of industrial agile software development. In this paper we classify and describe the main measurement types and areas that are reported in empirical studies. We provide descriptions of how and why metrics are used to support agile software development. We also analyzed how the presented metrics support the twelve principles of Agile Manifesto [1].

The results indicate that the reasons and use of metrics is focused on the following areas: Iteration planning, Iteration tracking, Motivating and improving, Identifying process problems, Pre-release quality, Post-release quality and Changes in processes or tools.

This paper provides researchers and practitioners with an useful overview of the measurements use in agile context and documented reasonings behind the proposed metrics. This study can be used as a source of relevant sources regarding researchers' interests and contexts.

Finally, we identified few propositions for future research on measuring in agile software development. First, in the academia lot of emphasis has been given to code metrics yet we found a little evidence of their use. Second, the applicable quality metrics for agile development and the relationship of pre-release quality metrics and post-release quality are important directions of future research. Third, we found that planning and tracking metrics for iteration were often used indicating a need to focus future research efforts on these areas. Fourth, use of metrics for motivating and enforcing process improvements can be an interesting future research topic.

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APPENDIX

A. SEARCH STRINGS

The first search string was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY(software AND (agile OR lean OR "crystal method" OR "crystal clear" OR dsdm OR "dynamic systems development method" OR fdd OR "feature driven development" OR "agile unified process" OR "agile modeling" OR scrumban OR kanban OR scrum OR "extreme programming" OR xp) AND (measur* OR metric OR diagnostic OR monitor*)) AND (LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA, "COMP")) AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "English"))

It found 512 hits 19 September 2013.

The second search string was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY(software AND (agile OR lean OR "crystal method" OR "crystal clear" OR dsdm OR "dynamic systems development method" OR fdd OR "feature driven development" OR "agile unified process" OR "agile modeling" OR scrumban OR kanban OR scrum OR "extreme programming" OR xp) AND (measur* OR metric OR diagnosticOR monitor*)) AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA, "ENGI")) AND (EXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "COMP") OR EXCLUDE(SUBJAREA, "PHYS") OR EXCLUDE(SUBJAREA,"MATE") OR EXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "BUSI") OR EXCLUDE(SUBJAREA, "MATH") OR EXCLUDE(SUBJAREA, "ENVI") OR EXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "EART") OR EXCLUDE(SUBJAREA, "DECI") OREXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "ENER"))

It found 220 hits 7 November 2013.

The third search string was:

TITLE-ABS-KEY(software AND (agile OR lean OR "crystal method" OR "crystal clear" OR dsdm OR "dynamic systems development method" OR fdd OR "feature driven development" OR "agile unified process" OR "agile modeling" OR scrumban OR kanban OR scrum OR "extreme programming" OR xp) AND (measur* OR metric OR diagnosticOR monitor*)) AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO(SUBJAREA, "BUSI")) AND (EXCLUDE (SUBJAREA, "ENGI") OR EXCLUDE(SUBJAREA, "COMP"))

It found 42 hits 10 December 2013.

B. INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Inclusion criteria

- Papers that present the use and experiences of metrics in an agile industry setting.

Exclusion criteria

- Papers that don't contain empirical data from industry cases.
- Papers that are not in English.
- Papers that don't have agile context. There is evidence of clearly non-agile practices or there is no agile method named. For example, paper mentions agile but case company has only three releases per year.
- Paper is only about one agile practice, which is not related to measuring.
- Papers that don't seem to have any data about metric usage. Similarly, if there are only a few descriptions of metrics but no other info regarding reasons or usage.
- Papers that have serious issues with grammar or vocabulary and therefore it takes considerable effort to understand sentences.
- Papers where the setting is not clear or results cannot be separated by setting, for example surveys where there is data both from academia and industry.
- Papers where the measurements are only used for the research. For example author measures which agile practices correlate with success.