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The Effect of Team Size and Dynamics on Agile Estimation

[1] SUNIL KUMAR SUVVARI INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER, USA.
[2] DR. ROHINI SAWALKAR, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SCHOOL OF BUSINESS,
DR. VISHWANATH KARAD MIT WORLD PEACE UNIVERSITY
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Abstract
This paper presents the impact of team size and dynamics on agile estimation accuracy and strategies for improving estimation in diversified teams. We employed a mixed-method approach with online surveys, interviews, and case studies. The data received and analyzed in this research came from 150 agile teams representing different industries. Our results show that strong interdependency exists between team size and the dispersion of estimations. The best estimation accuracy was when the team had 5-9 members. Team dynamics, particularly cohesion and psychological safety, emerged as important in the estimation outcome. Based on these insights, we propose a framework for improving estimation practice within agile teams, including tailoring and continuous improvement.
Keywords: Agile estimation, team size, team dynamics, software development, Planning Poker, story points, velocity, psychological safety

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Agile methodologies have undoubtedly given the radically different face to software development in the past two decades. Ever since the Agile Manifesto was published in 2001, agile crossed boundaries to enter multiple industries and enabled flexibility, collaboration, and iterative progress towards any given projects. Demands of agile frameworks growing in popularity lead to the accuracy of project estimation escalating to a very critical concern of the project success or failure decision and hence to the team performance.

1.2. Importance of Agile Estimation in Software Development

Accurate estimation forms the foundation of agile project management; it is significant in sprint planning, resource allocation, and setting the expectations of stakeholders. One research conducted by Standish Group in 2020 showed that agile projects were 1.5 times more successful compared to traditional approaches. This same study revealed that issues related to estimation accuracy still plagued 52% of agile projects. Such poor estimation likely results in missing deadlines, running over budget, and decreasing team morale at the end of a project. This reduces project outcomes and client satisfaction.

1.3. Overview of Team Size and Dynamics in Agile Projects

Agile teams vary greatly in size and composition, from small, co-located teams to large, distributed teams. As documented by the 14th Annual State of Agile Report in 2020, the average agile team size is 7, with the majority of them (61%) having between 5-9 members. However, 18% of organizations responded that their agile teams had 10 or more members. The interaction among team size and other internal dynamics comes to influence the estimation process and its outcomes in a very complex way.

1.4. Research Objectives

This study seeks to:
1. Investigate the effect of team size on the accuracy of estimating agile projects.
2. Discuss how team dynamics influence agile estimation processes.
3. Describe best practices for improving estimation accuracy in a diverse agile team.
4. Propose a framework for optimizing team composition and dynamics to get better estimation outcomes.

1.5. Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between team size and estimation accuracy on agile projects?
2. What factors in team dynamics have the greatest influence on estimation results?
3. How can estimation accuracy be improved for teams of various sizes and other dynamics?

1.6. Structure of the Paper

The paper is divided into six major sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings and Analysis, Discussion, and Conclusion. All of these sections are well expounded to cover the research topic, culminating in a detailed analysis of how team size and dynamics affect agile estimation.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Agile Methodologies

2.1.1. Principles of Agile Software Development

The Agile Manifesto as defined by Beck et al. in 2001 comprises four core values and twelve principles that drive agile methodologies. The principles venerate the following: individuals and interactions, working software, customer collaboration, and responding to change. According to the survey conducted by VersionOne in 2020, 97% of the companies report improvements while implementing agile practices, with the ability to handle changing priorities being the most prominent advantage according to 70% of the respondents.

2.1.2. Common Agile Frameworks (e.g., Scrum, Kanban, XP)

Scrum and Kanban are the two most popular frameworks under the banner of Agile, followed by eXtreme Programming. According to the 14th Annual State of Agile Report (2020), Scrum is the leading framework at 58%, followed by ScrumBan at 10%, and then Kanban at 7%. Each one has their very own, unique, embedded piece of project management and development best practices, which sets them apart in terms of collaboration frameworks and how they estimate work.

2.2. Agile Estimation Techniques

2.2.1. Story Points and Relative Estimation

Story points are a relative estimate of effort against user stories for their complexity and size. Cohn introduced this technique in 2005 to enable estimation of work by teams without commitment to specific time frames but rather addressing the relative effort a certain work would require. Usman et al. concluded in 2015 from a study that 78% of agile teams they surveyed used story points for estimation, and out of those, 68% showed improved accuracy compared to time-based estimates.

2.2.2. Planning Poker and Other Consensus-Based Techniques

Planning Poker is a technique for collaborative estimation, introduced by Grenning in 2002, wherein team members simultaneously reveal their estimates to promote discussion and consensus-building. Other techniques will still ensure the involvement of the team in estimation, like T-shirt sizing and dot voting. According to Molokken-Ostvold and Haugen, research conducted in 2007 revealed that Planning Poker showed more accurate estimates compared to individual expert judgment; on average, estimation accuracy was improved by 26%.

2.2.3. Function Points and Velocity-Based Estimation

Function points used by Albrecht, 1979, provide a standard measure for software functionality, while velocity-based estimation is based on the use of historical performance measurements of a team for predicting future capacity. In this regard, a comparative study performed by Santana et al., 2011, revealed that velocity-based estimation performed better in agile projects compared to function points and improved estimation accuracy with an average value of 23%.

2.3. Factors Influencing Estimation Accuracy

2.3.1. Historical Challenges in Agile Estimation

Agile estimation is not without its problems, though; it principally includes the intrinsic uncertainty of software development, changing requirements, and the inaccuracy of forecasting human performance.

In a systematic review, Jørgensen and Shepperd (2007) filtered through 304 software estimation papers to establish some major issues at hand: the absence of standardized process(es) for estimation and cognitive bias having a huge influence on accuracy.

2.3.2. The Role of Team Experience and Expertise

Team experience and expertise are important factors in the accuracy of estimation. Usman et al. (2014) found out that groups that have an average of 5 or more years of agile experience had an estimation accuracy 35% higher than teams with less than 2 years of experience. Besides, diverse skill sets within a team result in more detailed assessment of the complexity of a task at hand and increase general estimation accuracy by 18%.

2.4. The Impact of Team Size on Agile Estimation

2.4.1. Small vs. Large Teams: A Comparative Analysis

It has been shown that teams with 5-9 members tend to provide more accurate estimates compared to larger teams. Boehm (1981) indicated that team size inversely relates to a worker's productivity; it was recently proved by empirical studies. Baruah, 2015, discovered that teams sized from 5-9 have an average estimation error of 21% compared to those having 10 or more members with an average estimation error of 37%.

2.4.2. Communication Overhead and Coordination Effort

The greater the size of the team, the greater the communication overhead and coordination effort, probably negatively affecting estimation accuracy. Brooks stated it very precisely in his book "The Mythical Man-Month" back in 1975: "Adding manpower to a late software project makes it later." Melo et al. (2013) associated this effect in a quantitative meaningful form: on average, the increase in communication overhead is about 15% for each additional team member above seven.

2.4.3. Team Size and Velocity: A Correlational Study

It has been shown in a number of studies that there is a non-linear relationship between team size and velocity. While the total velocity tends to go up with large teams, per-person productivity falls off if the teams are too big. For example, Moe et al. (2010) found that the highest per-person productivity of 18 story points per person per sprint was observed with groups of 5-7 members. In contrast, groups with 10 or more members achieved 12 story points per person per sprint on average.

2.5. Team Dynamics and Their Influence on Estimation

2.5.1. The Role of Collaboration and Team Cohesion

Better cohesion and higher collaboration levels can be related to higher estimation accuracy. In a grounded theory study, Hoda, Noble, and Marshall (2013) surveyed 30 agile practitioners and concluded that teams with good interpersonal relationships and shared goals were 28 percent more accurate in giving estimates than low-cohesion teams.

2.5.2. Decision-Making Processes in Agile Teams

Examples of how the estimating sessions are important to estimation, especially as the train of decision affects agile teams, can be better highlighted as in one study by Abrahamsson et al., who evaluated data from 18 agile projects and found that groups applying consensus-based decision-making techniques, such as Planning Poker, presented 31% less estimation variance than groups that relied on individual expert judgment.

2.5.3. Psychological Safety and Its Effect on Estimation Accuracy

Defined as the shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, psychological safety is positively affecting the estimation accuracy. The concept was first proposed by Edmondson in 1999 and was later applied to agile teams by researchers. Dikert et al. established that high-psychological-safety teams were 42% more likely to have open discussions and challenge assumptions at estimate work, leading to more accurate results.

2.6. Existing Strategies for Improving Estimation Accuracy

2.6.1. Continuous Feedback and Iterative Estimation

By having regular retrospectives and constant feedback loops, teams can work on improving their estimation processes, which generally get better with time. Schwaber and Sutherland (2020) pointed out that sprint retrospectives are intrinsic to the Scrum framework. In a study, Drury et al. (2012) found that teams who ran regular retrospectives had improved Estimation Accuracy by an average of 23% within six months.

2.6.2. Use of Historical Data and Metrics

With historical data, metrics such as sprint velocities and completed story points could make the estimation accuracy even better by providing the base of the estimation to be data-oriented. In the opinion of Cohn, 2005, velocity is one of the most critical metrics for agile estimation. According to Dantas et al., 2018, a work study showed that users' estimates, together with historical data for estimation purposes, were 37% better in precision compared to the case of only human expert judgments.

2.6.3. Training and Skill Development in Estimation Techniques

Training and skill development in estimation techniques can be an excellent investment to boost the performance of a team. According to Usman, 2014, teams formally trained in agile estimation techniques improved their accuracy on average by 29% within a period of three months. This comprises the acquaintance with various estimation methods and practice in applying those to real scenarios.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

In the current study, a mixed-method approach was used in which both quantitative and qualitative research methods were combined to deliver all-inclusive analysis concerning the effect of team size and dynamics on agile estimation. The research design was lifted from Creswell and Creswell, who argued that multiple data sources should be integrated for holistic understanding over complex phenomena.

3.2. Data Collection Methods

3.2.1. Surveys and Questionnaires

We distributed online questionnaires to 500 agile practitioners representing various industries and received 387 valid answers—a response rate of 77.4%. The surveys contained questions on team size, estimation techniques applied, perceived accuracy, and team dynamics. Dimensions of the measurement instrument were mainly focused on the results obtained from previously validated instruments in other studies, for example, using a modified version of the Team Effectiveness Questionnaire developed by Bateman et al.

3.2.2. Interviews with Agile Practitioners

Thirty agile experts—Scrum Masters, Product Owners, and Agile Coaches—were interviewed in a semi-structured manner to ensure deep insight into the estimation practices and challenges. The interview protocol was designed in the manner suggested by Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, so as to ensure a moderate level of structure at the same time as being flexible throughout the process of questioning.

3.2.3. Case Studies of Agile Teams

We focused on 10 agile teams, varying in size between 5 and 11 members, while observing estimation processes and outcomes for six months. The approach of Yin (2018) impacted the case study design: this would enable a multiple-case design, providing an opportunity for cross-case analysis that would lead to the identification of patterns across various team contexts.

3.2.4. Observation of Agile Ceremonies (e.g., Sprint Planning)

It draws on experience from the direct observation of 50 sprint planning sessions across 20 different teams, collecting data about estimation practices and team interactions. The focus areas in the

observation protocol were developed according to Adler and Adler's work, 1994, relating to both verbal and non-verbal cues in the estimation discussion.

3.3. Sampling Techniques

Participants would be chosen to obtain a vast variety of agile teams working in different industries and varying greatly in size. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling will achieve maximum variation and follow the approach described by Patton as far back as 2002; it will enable the exploration of estimation practices within a wide range of contexts.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedures

3.4.1. Quantitative Analysis of Estimation Data

Statistical analyses of the survey data and historical estimation records were carried out to point out correlations of team size and dynamics with estimation accuracy. The analysis was done using IBM SPSS Statistics 26. In the analysis of relationships between variables, multiple regression analyses, ANOVA, and factor analysis were applied.

3.4.2. Qualitative Analysis of Team Dynamics

Thematic analysis was undertaken for interview transcripts and observation notes, which highlighted recurring themes related to team dynamics and their consequence on estimation. We worked according to Braun and Clarke's steps for undertaking thematic analysis in 2006. We used NVivo 12 to facilitate the process of coding and subsequent theme development.

3.4.3. Mixed-Methods Approach

The presentation of this study with both quantitative and qualitative data helps to foster complex understandings of the interplay between team characteristics and estimation outcomes. Followed in this research work is a convergent parallel mixed-method design according to Creswell and Plano Clark, in which findings are joint across data sources.

3.5. Reliability and Validity Considerations

Data triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing were applied to guarantee reliability and validity. Cronbach's alpha tested the reliability of quantitative measures. From points of view in this regard, all the scales showed internal consistency above $\alpha > 0.70$. The use of previously validated measuring instruments and expert review concerning research design strengthened the validity.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Overview of Collected Data

Desk research created a strong dataset with 387 completed surveys, 30 in-depth interviews, 10 case studies, and observation in 50 sprint planning sessions. The background of surveyed organizations is 35% software development, 22% finance, 18% healthcare, and 25% other industries. Team size levels vary between 3 and 25, while the median team comprises 7 members.

4.2. Impact of Team Size on Estimation Accuracy

4.2.1. Correlation Between Team Size and Estimation Variability

In survey data, analysis showed a strong, positive association of team size with estimation variability ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, teams with 5 to 9 members possessed the lowest variability related to an estimation, while the average deviation from the actual completion times was 18%. On the other hand, the average deviation in case of teams that include 10 members or more was 37%.

4.2.2. Case Study Analysis: Small vs. Large Agile Teams

Our case studies offer insight into the estimation practices of small, medium-sized, and large teams. Small teams carry high individual accountability, but then run into the pitfalls at other times when they lack diversity. Medium-sized teams are probably able to provide the best balance between collaboration and efficiency. Large teams are suffering from huge communication overheads that usually result in fragmented estimates.

Table 2: Estimation Accuracy by Team Size

Team Size	Average Estimation Error	Standard Deviation
3	-42%	8%
5	-9%	6%
10	-15%	9%
16	37%	11%

4.3. Influence of Team Dynamics on Estimation Outcomes

4.3.1. Effect of Team Cohesion on Estimation Consistency

Using the Team Effectiveness Questionnaire, it was seen that the high cohesion teams had 27% less variation compared to the low cohesion teams in their estimates. The qualitative data that emerged from the interviews emphasized trust and mutual understanding as necessary ingredients to arrive at the right estimate.

4.3.2. The Role of Leadership and Decision-Making

As a result, estimation accuracy showed that the leadership style emerged. Teams with facilitative leaders who encouraged open, equal participation in discussions had an estimation accuracy 33% higher than teams led in more directive styles.

4.3.3. Conflicts and Their Impact on Estimation Accuracy

This study revealed that unresolved conflicts in teams were negatively correlated with estimation accuracy: $r = –0.54$, $p < 0.01$. Thus, the average estimation error in teams who reported frequent, unresolved conflicts was 42%, compared with an average estimation error of only 23% in teams with effective ways to resolve their conflicts.

4.4. Comparative Analysis with Existing Literature

Our results are generally consistent with prior work on Agile estimation; meanwhile, they further develop new and deeper exploration of the complex interrelations among team size, team dynamics, and estimation accuracy. We confirm the optimum number of 5-9 members in a team for estimation accuracy as per both Boehm (1981) and Baruah (2015). In a significant new contribution, our study quantifies the impact of team size on estimation variability in a way that shows up as a 19% increase in estimation error for teams over the size of 9.

Our study thus builds on the seminal role of psychological safety in improving estimation accuracy by Edmondson and more recently Dikert et al. Empirically, this research shows that not only are teams likely to engage in open discussions, but also provide estimates 42% more accurate. This emphasizes the need to create an environment in which team members feel safe expressing their uncertainties and challenging the assumptions regarding the estimation.

4.5. Identification of Key Challenges in Agile Estimation

In our mixed-methods approach, the recurring challenges in these regards were independent of team size and context: technical uncertainty, reported 68% of the time; changing requirements with 62%; and team member availability and variation in skill with 57%. We can thus say that these results outline challenges not differing from the ones within Jørgensen and Shepperd's (2007) systematic review but serve with updated percentages for agile practices today.

What was interestingly pointed out by our study is a new challenge specific to larger agile teams: the "estimation fragmentation effect." It is a phenomenon whereby subgroups of a large team separately come up with different estimation baselines, which may cause inconsistencies in overall project estimates. This effect has been manifested in 73% of teams with more than 12 members, thus pointing out the need for strategies maintaining the consistency of estimation in scaled agile environments.

4.6. Case Study Findings: Best Practices and Lessons Learned

From these examples we have been to glean several lessons regarding best practice of Estimations in the different setups of interactions. One of the most successful ways of doing it is that of a medium-size team having 7 members with a 2-step approach. First silent estimation without falling prey to anchoring bias. Next was a structured Debate to come to a consensus wrt the given expectation. This gave 31% difference in accuracy over the next half year.

Another interesting practice has come from a huge team of 18 members working on a complex financial system. They put in place a rotating expert system for the estimating process, wherein the estimation sessions include subject matter experts in each area on a rotating basis. This approach mediates the fragmentation effect and leads to higher overall estimation accuracy by 24%.

4.7. Statistical Analysis of Estimation Accuracy Across Different Teams

The multiple regression relationship analysis between all of the above-mentioned factors and the accuracy of the estimation was done using the model, considering team size, team cohesion, psychological safety, leadership style, and conflict resolution effectiveness as the independent variables. The summary of results is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis of Factors Influencing Estimation Accuracy

Factor	Beta Coefficient	p-value
Team Size	-0.32	<0.001
Team Cohesion	0.28	<0.001
Psychological Safety	0.35	<0.001
Leadership Style (Facilitative)	0.22	<0.01
Conflict Resolution Effectiveness	0.19	<0.01

$R^2 = 0.67$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.65$, $F(5, 381) = 154.23$, $p < 0.001$

The model accounted for 67% of the variance in the estimation accuracy ($R^2 = 0.67$) and is thus considered quite powerful. Looking at the dimensions separately, it revealed that psychological safety was the best predictor of estimation accuracy, followed by team size,, and finally, team cohesion.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

Our results clearly confirm the impact of team size and dynamics on agile estimation accuracy. Increasing team size has a negative impact on estimation accuracy, which thus points to an important consideration in scaling agile teams—in particular, more than 9 team members. The "estimation fragmentation effect" pinpointed in larger teams poses a challenge to ensure consistency within the scaled agile environment.

The strong positive impact of psychological safety on estimation accuracy underlines the importance of a team environment being open and collaborative. This is supported by a large body of literature covering all areas of team performance and specifically extends to agile estimation. Leaders and practitioners should enable an environment where thoughts can be shared freely with high integrity and healthy debates in estimation sessions.

5.2. Implications for Agile Project Management

The results of this study have a number of significant implications for agile project management. First, it serves as a warning to companies against the danger of extremely large agile teams, as this might reduce the accuracy of the estimation and hence the whole project performance. In cases where larger

teams are necessary, strategies should be adopted that reduce communication overhead and guarantee consistency in estimation.

For that reason, development of team cohesion and psychological safety should be treated as success-critical factors in agile projects. Allocation of time and resources to the aforementioned activities by project managers and Scrum Masters, and the creation of environments characterized by trust and open communication, become important.

5.3. Strategies for Improving Estimation Accuracy

5.3.1. Optimizing Team Size for Estimation Efficiency

Based on these findings, we would recommend that agile teams be restricted to 5-9 members whenever possible. When the dimension of a project requires more than nine team members, a "team of teams" concept is advisable, wherein several small teams work together through predefined interfaces. All the benefits related to smaller teams will be preserved, and larger needs of projects will also be met.

5.3.2. Enhancing Team Dynamics through Training and Development

Invest in training programs that include not only technical skills but also soft skills like communications, conflict resolutions, and collaborative decision-making. Regular team retrospectives should discuss estimation processes and outcomes for continuous improvement.

5.3.3. Leveraging Technology and Tools for Better Estimation

Use data-driven estimating tools incorporating historical performance data and machine-learning algorithms to supplement human judgment—with the condition that such tools promote conversation within the team and consensus building, not replace it.

5.4. Recommendations for Agile Practitioners

5.4.1. Customizing Estimation Techniques to Team Characteristics

Tailor estimation techniques to your team's characteristics. Larger teams might graze through more complex estimation sessions by breaking down into smaller groups and then consolidate whereas smaller teams might drive more intensive and collaborative estimation processes.

5.4.2. Integrating Continuous Improvement in Estimation Practices

Hold recurring "estimation calibration" meetings in which the team reflects on past estimates against actual outcomes. Use such meetings to find patterns, biases, and any defects so that improvements in the estimation process can be made.

5.4.3. Addressing Psychological Safety and Team Trust

Work actively on building psychological safety within your team. These can range from "blameless post-mortems" for missed estimates to celebrating when a team member had the guts to say there was uncertainty or challenge involved, to ensuring that all members of the team get an equal opportunity to state their view in estimation discussions.

5.5. Comparison with Industry Standards and Best Practices

Our findings show the current industry standards on agile estimation supporting them and, at the same time, extending them. Planning Poker is an important technique—so our research shows to be very team-size- and team-dynamics-dependent. Industry best practice should evolve to place greater focus on optimizing team composition and fostering positive team dynamics as the very bedrock of accurate agile estimation.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

This paper has established the paramount effect of team size and dynamics on agile estimation accuracy. The main conclusions that can be drawn are related to setting an ideal range for team members at 5-9 for optimal estimation, realizing the pivotal role of psychological safety in the estimation results, and establishing a phenomenon labeled "estimation fragmentation effect" in large teams. Such insights provide in-depth multimodal clearance of what brings about successful agile estimation practices.

6.2. Contribution to Agile Methodology Research

Our research enhances this body of knowledge concerning agile methodology by providing empirical evidence of the relationship between team characteristics and estimation accuracy. Both quantitative data and rich qualitative insights, due to the mixed-methods approach, set this study apart from existing literature that focuses quite frequently on either only the quantitative metric or the case study.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

The following are some of the limitations of this comprehensive study. Even though the sample is diverse and heterogeneous, it may not provide full representation in all agile contexts. Moreover, case studies lasting six months offer very valuable insights but may miss long-term trends regarding estimation accuracy. Future studies could build on longitudinal studies over extended periods.

6.4. Suggestions for Future Research

Future work can focus on determining the effects of cultural differences on agile estimation in global teams, assessing long-term estimation improvement strategies, and using Marvin machine learning techniques to help human-driven estimation processes.

6.5. Final Reflections on Team Size, Dynamics, and Estimation

This paper contributes complex interrelations among team size, team dynamics, and agile estimation accuracy. While there is no single route to provide perfect estimates, understanding and optimizing these factors can dramatically improve the outcomes of those estimates. As agile methodologies further evolve, students and researchers must remain attuned to the human elements fundamentally shaping the successes of agile projects.

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