

Agile Story Points – Stop abusing them!

OK, the problem here isn't that you are abusing Story Points though you ARE misusing them. You are abusing your people and hindering your company's overall objectives. Don't believe me? Let's do a deep dive here. Note that this will assume some basic knowledge of Agile terms and principles.

I've been in several Agile shops and what follows are some of the pitfalls I have encountered associated with Story Point Abuse. I LIKE Agile, I think it brings a lot of good things to the table. That said, here are some errors I have witnessed that hamper organizational success. Clearly, these are more errors of execution than problems with Agile itself.

Story Point - Definition

Here is sort of a pragmatic, experiential definition of what Story Points represent:

“Story Points are an **ESTIMATE** of **RELATIVE** difficulty associated with a given feature provided by and for a **SPECIFIC** team”

In a little more detail, a specific Agile team will provide sort of a “gut feel” for a specific feature. This gut feel is based on their skill and knowledge level, confidence in understanding the feature, the tech platform and tools available to them, the team's history together – many factors. Keep in mind that the feature in question may be poorly defined. This gut feel will be assigned a relative value and that value is called Story Points.

That's a decent real world working definition.

Now, over time, i.e. multiple sprints, you can sort of maybe kind of get a feel for the [Velocity](#) of a specific team. Simply said, you can average the historic Story Points completed in past sprints and get some very general idea of how many features that specific team can deliver in a given amount of time.

I know what you are thinking: Great! Awesome concept! That all sounded kind of vague but the creative process DOES have a bunch of unknowns. Story Points DO sound like a good way to acknowledge that we don't know everything but recognize that we need to make progress. As long as we understand that points are relative to a specific team, we will be fine.

That last part is where things start to break down.

Two ways Story Points are abused

Story Points are used to compare different groups.

Story Points are used as an individual performance metric.

Using Story Points to compare two groups is like trying to compare apples and giraffes. Think about it: you are trying to directly compare *guesstimates* from different people at different skill levels implementing different features with different tools.

See the problem here?

For clarification and as a concrete example, assume Team X has a Velocity of 20 and Team Y has a Velocity of 10. That tells us nothing comparative. I KNOW it is tempting to think that 20 is two times as much as 10 but that won't work here. What one team calls 3 Story Points another team may think of as 8 or a 2. There is nothing wrong with this, that is how Story Points are intended to work. This comparison only really tells us that the teams use two different scales. Team X uses the apple scale, Team Y the giraffe scale. Well, that is the most hopeful and innocent explanation. There may be other, less desirable explanations that we will get to in a bit.

Story Points don't work as an individual performance metric for similar reasons. Let's consider with an additional example.

We will assume that you use [Story Point Poker](#) to estimate your features. Further, let's assume that there are 5 people on the team and for a given feature, the team shows cards that look like:

3	5	8	8	21
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This item will likely be 8 Story Points, maybe 13. Everybody trucks along like ok, that sounds fine (if the person that said 21 doesn't get assigned the feature). Well, guess what? The sprint starts and that's exactly what ends up happening. Normally, this is not a problem BUT if you are using Story Points as an individual performance metric (Bad Idea, btw), then the person that understands this feature the least is going to be unjustly penalized. They told you at the beginning they didn't understand the feature and now you are beating them up for being honest. Don't do this to your people and your company.

Story Points just don't work for this purpose. I recommend developing legitimate performance evaluation, growth and feedback processes.

Commonality

These misuse scenarios share one key trait: they indicate that you are trying to apply a manufacturing mindset to a knowledge work environment. That is wrong for a lot of reasons, but specifically because you STILL cannot compare apples and giraffes. There has been a lot written on this subject so I won't elaborate here.

Results of the misuse

What's the net of this? A couple of things come immediately to mind.

First, you are basing any assumptions on bad data if you use Story Points in either of the ways mentioned here. That means that you are evaluating people inaccurately and thus hurting your

company's efforts. I know from firsthand experience that employee evaluations are TOUGH. It really would be helpful to have an objective measure to use. Unfortunately, Story Points by their very nature won't work for that purpose.

Second, you are teaching your teams to lie to you. In fact, you are rewarding them for doing so. The teams will determine that the people with the most Story Points completed get the kudos. At best, the teams independently begin to up their estimates. Tasks that would have previously been 3 Story Points become 8. Items that were 13 Story Points before will likely become 34 or higher going forward. At worst, the teams work together to game the system – that is, they lie to you in concerted, synchronized efforts. True, your teams are working together now but it is NOT in a way that you really want. THIS qualifies as one of the previously mentioned “less desirable explanations”.

Conclusion

Use Story Points only for estimates of an individual team's capacity at any given time. That's all they are intended to represent. Your organization will be better for it.

Biography

Mark is a contractor / consultant on all things software development related. He has split his many years of professional experience between conventional employment and as a small business owner. When he is not busy working, Mark enjoys learning, socializing, exercise, cooking, reading and napping, though not necessarily in that order. The best contact method is through LinkedIn, second best is at themarkharrell@gmail.com