

Scaling Agile Adoption through Local Agile Centers of Excellence

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When adopting agile, one of the most common myths is that agile is a silver bullet. After spending a little over a year with the **AT&T organization Digital Experience** and watching their journey through Agile Transformation, they have created their own silver bullet through an agile local center of excellence. This article will outline how the **Digital Experience organization** has implemented a local agile center of excellence and why they are critical to scaling agile in large organization/companies like AT&T.

Formation of a Local Agile Center of Excellence (Guide Group)

The Digital Experience organization realized quickly that a dedicated **Agile Coach** could not be maintained long term and could not provide all the services needed for the entire organization. Digital Experience needed to create their own process with the support of the **Agile Center of Excellence** so that an Agile Coach would not be a bottleneck to their organization. This led to the formation of the Digital Experience Guide Group by **Kurt Seifert and Rebekah Knapp**. The Digital Experience Guide Group is a **self-organized** team that is the front door for all agile work and has been successful in creating their own process to ensure the communication channels have been created and teams have the necessary resources to be successful. To support scaling of their team as their organization grows each new member of the guide group is trained by members of the guide group. This train the trainer model allows the guide group to function without dedicated support from limited resources. The guide group in addition follows the Scrum Framework and can be seen having daily standup and practicing what they teach in their co-located office in downtown Dallas. The guide group became the local center of excellence. The primary goal of the local center of excellence is people and communication over process.

Scaling Through People & Communication

The local center of excellence realized that they needed to demonstrate value by making their work visible and the need to communicate often. Every week on Sunday, Rebekah Knapp creates a release grid of all the work the organization is engaged on and distributes it to the right people. Unlike the Agile Center of Excellence the local center of excellence is engaged daily with the right people and knows who needs to be informed and engaged. To ensure the Product Owners and Scrum Teams are working on a common working agreement the local center of excellence has created the DOR – Definition of Ready process. This three phase process is an organizational process that ensures work is communicated in a common format, team members agree to a common practice, work is visible, and the scrum framework is implemented by the scrum teams. Due to a partnership with the Scrum Teams Delivery Executive Director Michael Morris and Lead Scrum Master

Harshad Desai from the local center of excellence every Scrum Team performs a metrics that matter review with Mike Morris.

Metrics that Matter

The Agile Center of Excellence recommends agile metrics that matter. These metrics are captured by each of the Scrum Teams and presented to the Executive Director Mike Morris after every iteration. These sessions are attended by multiple members of the leadership team the Agile Center of Excellence and the local agile center of excellence. These sessions are not to judge the team but to provide leadership support and retrospective on what can be done in the future. These recommendations are communicated to Kurt Seifert's team and used as input into updating the local center of practices processes and evaluating the need for a tiger team and additional areas of support that might be needed from the Agile Center of Excellence.

Tiger Team

A tiger team (sub-team) is a team of self-organized individuals that join together to solve a problem. The Digital Experience local center of excellence has created tiger teams to address communication with UI/UX through a custom process and currently has a team to address **Adobe** Tagging issues as well as migration to the new TD Platform. Since these tiger teams come from the organization which has much larger capacity than the Agile Center of Excellence, and is able to take risk due to their relationships with stakeholders and product owners. Their lessons learned are shared with the Agile COE coach; however, the local center of excellence is responsible for their own retrospective and process updates.

Why Locals Centers of Excellence

Local centers of excellence create a community of practitioner and learners that can't be provided by the Agile Center of Excellence. Due to their closeness to the stakeholders, product owners, and scrum masters have the communication channels already established. Due to their size they can provide rapid response to issues at the local level instead of having to bring issues to agile coaches who could several days to follow-up. Since all members of the local center of excellence are members of the same organization their growth is a reinvestment into the organizations knowledge base. As AT&T transforms into an agile company its success will not come from the top down but by the multiple communities that interact and learn from each other. As a community of learners we can all become the silver bullet. Form a local community of practice today and become the new Agile Center of Excellence today.

About the Authors



Eric O'Brien

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Eric O'Brien, SAFe Agilist, CSM, CSPO, PMP started his career in Computer Litigation Support for the United States Attorney's Office before migrating to the Bay Area. There he began a 10 year career with AT&T, a multinational telecommunications corporation. At AT&T, he has worked in diverse roles such as a Test Quality Manager for 3 years for project Lightspeed aka U-Verse (where he found a passion for coordinating large projects and programs). As a Lead Project/Program Manager for 4 years, he led a multi-million dollar project portfolio. Then, inspired by an Agile Boot Camp, he became a Scrum Master for 2 years working on Cloud projects integrating with OpenStack and Pivotal Lab's Cloud Foundry. This led to a move to the Dallas Fort Worth area and a change in roles to Agile Coach. Eric is presently responsible for agile transformation, providing leader-led boot camps on Agile and the Scrum Framework, auditing organizations for agile maturity and overall subject matter expert for AT&T Digital Experience. In addition to the day job, his volunteer projects include the non-profit Dallas-Fort Worth Chapter of FACES (Filipino-American Communication Employees of AT&T) resource group in which he is the Vice President and Graduate Teaching Assistant at Georgia Tech for the Online Master of Science Computer Science (OMS CS) program. Visit his LinkedIn Profile at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/eric-obrien-pmp-safe-agilist-csm-cspo-987a565>



Rebekah Knapp

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Rebekah Knapp is the Director of Client Services for Tekzenit, a digital transformation company offering user-experience, design and software solutions using Agile. She has over 15 years of experience in product development, deployment and management. Starting in telecom, her first large product launch was enhanced directory assistance with call completion for PrimeCo which became Verizon. From there, she worked in eCommerce to manage, deliver and enhance products such as DSL (old dial-up for those that might recall), corporate and promotional websites, and entire corporate internet entities including both marketing

and operations (think strategy, banner ads, affiliate programs, online sales/sales inventory, customer service, credits/returns, web development, redesigns, channel management – the whole thing). Often referred to as “Reebok” because of her agility and speed, she has been able to transform how companies traditionally manage and deliver large projects. She fills all spare time working with fellow innovators on new product ideas, reading (current business books, classics, and New York Best Sellers), gardening, and spending time with her husband and two teenagers. She currently is on assignment at AT&T with Business Digital Solutions. Visit her LinkedIn Profile at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rebekahknapp>



Harshad Desai

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Harshad Desai is a Program Manager with Cognizant Technology Solutions, a multi-national company that provides custom information technology, consulting, and business process outsourcing services. He has over 16 years of experience in Information Technology and has been working in Project Management for last 10 years. He has been working in delivering projects using Agile Methodology for the last 6 years and has been working on transforming organization from traditional waterfall to Agile Methodology for Software Delivery. In his spare time, he volunteers for PMI's Dallas chapter and spends time with his family. He is currently on an assignment with AT&T. His linkedin profile is available at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/harshad-desai-4261225>



Kurt Seifert

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Kurt Seifert has flirted with project and process management all of his life. Starting out when he was young working on his families Porsche 914s, he campaigned in SCCA club racing. Although most would think it would be all mechanical, he gravitated to; preparation tasks, travel scheduling, and competition data gathering. Moving on, post college, he ended up in a role in the Windsurfing industry (not far from racing cars actually) doing Sales, Race Team and Trade show management for a global company. Again, complex management of 'stuff' race team, R&D, equipment, scheduling, and trade

shows, was my passion although, he had a 'sales' title. Kurt moved into technology in his next professional career. As a Director of Sales for Hosting for one of the world's most admired brands, he had a change meeting as part of a new data center with the Dir of Operation who handed him his card which had a title of PMP, which he had never heard of before. In discussion over dinner, Kurt finally put a 'name' to what he had been doing most of his life - Project Manager. The constraints of PMP structure quickly showed their limitations and he found himself at Menlo Innovations in Ann Arbor at a class on a new way to work.

Work experience

AT&T, Director of Program Innovation and Operations

December 2012 - Present, Dallas, Texas, United States

Kurt's role(s) has evolved over the years. It began as an Agile transformation project in 2012. He built the teams from the ground up, ramping from 1 team to over 25 by January 2014. His role included almost every aspect from hiring the Scrum master and PO roles to daily standup with the Agile coaches. He worked the Program, Project, and release backlogs with the POs to maintain a healthy backlog for the teams to consume. Working with Executive leadership he held Quarterly Product Vision Team meetings across the various projects. For the first 18 months the focus was on educating the Business on Agile methodology and how Scrum works. The ceremonies, roles, cadences were the focus, during the startup phase. Into 2014 it became apparent that a Product Definition team would need to help agree the standard teams, and the intra-team roles in order to successfully 'bake' the Vision & technical Solutions. The complexity of the Business and technical environment could not be encapsulated into the team itself. Kurt ran the PDT team as a Scrum team with a Scrum Master, and himself as the PO. They have daily standup and work through backlog just as a dev scrum team would. They hold sprint retrospectives and are continually striving to be better each sprint. See more at:

<https://www.scrumalliance.org/community/profile/kseifert2#sthash.OASRRjB4.dpuf>