Colocation
A Case Study in the Rewards and Perils

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Welcome
introduction
AKA, my company would like you to know nothing in this presentation should be construed as investment advice.
I work in a development team of approximately twenty people that write, test and support custom software for a financial services company.

- 4 small development teams assigned to various business units throughout the company to support the needs of the business users.
- Each development team works with a Product Owner who is subject matter expert within the business unit and who has a “regular” job in the company.
- The methodology used to develop software is up to us. We naturally evolved into using Agile.

-Originally all the teams were seated together in a large open area on one floor of our building.
At Parametric, we've been using Agile as our software development methodology for about 5 or 6 years. We constantly “inspect and adapt”.

We wanted to improve our interactions and collaboration with our business users.

We felt ultimately that this would let our teams be more flexible in producing higher quality software quickly.

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**Agile Manifesto**

... we value:

*Individuals and interactions* over processes and tools
*Working software* over comprehensive documentation
*Customer collaboration* over contract negotiation
*Responding to change* over following a plan.
Business users – groups of 7-20 people

We hoped to increase the collaboration between the development team and the end users by providing ongoing opportunities for interaction…

All day long… every day… in a casual manner. The developers would pick up additional information just by hearing the regular conversations.

When someone on the development team had a question about how something should work or wanted feedback on new work, they could quickly interact with a business user. No more scheduling demos or trying track someone down or wait for a return email.

Our Grand Experiment

Move 1 or more development teams to sit with their product owner and the day to day users of the software.

Desired outcome:

- Improve the development team’s understanding of the business process.
- Increase the business users’ understanding of the development process.
- Improve the relationship between the development team and the business users.
- Decrease the time it took to get feedback on new features.
- Decrease the amount of re-work and bug-fixes occurring after release.

…At the end of the day, write better software faster.
The differences between Team A and B experience – quality of the data gleaned from communication – Team A – rich. Team B – less descriptive. Team D – sitting with interns.

We were originally concerned about support requests side tracking the development teams – did not happen.
Quotes from the staff involved, both pro and con.

"It was so easy. All I had to do was turn my chair around and ask."

"If I had a question, I had three people in earshot who could answer it."

"Closer collaboration has made both halves of our collective team better."

"I was confident that everyone on the development team understood the problem and had come up with the best solution."

"Things got a lot better once we figured it all out."

"I felt disconnected from the rest of the QA team. I didn’t know what they were doing."

"Too many meetings to try to keep up with the rest of the team!"

"Things changed, and I didn’t know about it."

"I realized I needed more information just to understand the discussion."

"There was no one there to back me up."

"I expected them to ask if they didn’t understand. I’m not a mind-reader."
The most established team had the best results and got the most benefit from co-locating with their business users. This team also sat with business users who had to openly communicate all day long about their business process, so it was easy to pick up information.

We thought we had established standards. We didn’t. They had been held together with peer pressure. Once the teams scattered, all of them felt EVERYTHING was changeable under “self-organization.” New team members had no idea what to expect and added to the sense of chaos. Once we got serious about what negotiable and what wasn’t the chaos subsided and progress returned.
We moved a newly formed team. And they ended up sitting near a very busy product owner and right next to the Interns in that department. Not useful. This team ended up making too many of their decisions with limited understanding of the business problem and little input from the business users/product owner.

You know what they say about “Assuming…”

Team members who didn’t understand the business didn’t pick up information from the ambient conversation; they put on headphones to block out the noise.
Process Changes

- Formalize standards and enforce them
- Work with each team to determine process and get agreement
- Adhere to the rituals of Agile and Scrum
- Regular meetings with peer groups to exchange ideas and discuss challenges
- Regular business domain presentations.
Recommendations

• Provide a base level of training on the business domain, so the development team can ask intelligent questions and pick up more information from the surrounding conversations.

• Be clear about standards and expectations, as well as what can be changed and determined by the team.

• Coach and support the team in the transition. The interactions among the team members, product owner and business users change when they are colocated.

Try it!
Alternatives

What if you can’t locate your development team with your business users? Or you did, and it didn’t work out?

- Have the product owner sit with the development team, if the product owner is well-versed in the business use of the software.
- Have the product owner sit with the business users and share knowledge gained with the development team.
- Ask some of the business users to attend daily status meetings or regular planning meetings, even if they have to attend by conference call.
- Arrange frequent “ride alongs” for the development team members to learn more about the business process. Use desktop sharing or webinar technology, if necessary.
What’s your experience?
Thank you