MSc Thesis Opportunity on Innovation in Agile Work

We are looking for motivated MSc student(s) that are intrigued by problem-setting and problem-solving and that are motivated by understanding how agile ways of working actually work in practice. The sought-after students are to engage in a 30 ECTS thesis project (January – June 2023).

The thesis topic is directly drawn from an identified research need and the thesis project has the possibility to contribute directly to ongoing research. The thesis project is initiated by a research group with connections to both the *Unit for Management and Technology* at INDEK (ITM) and the *Division of Networks and Systems Engineering* at the Department of Computer Science (EECS).

Proposed project

The agile way of working is winning ground, and many companies are transitioning into agile organizations, especially for their development work. In doing so, the organization not only needs to manage the change in how their work is planned and undertaken but also the strengths and weaknesses of their chosen workways.

Many organizations are convinced about the advantages of organizing development work according to the agile principles and manifesto. Thus, agile has been brought to scale where organizations not only re-organize their development projects, but also transform the entire organization into an agile enterprise. Since beginning of 2020 the Scaled Agile Framework (SAFe) has become a well-known and well-established framework for bringing agile to scale.

One of the primary reasons for established companies to undertake agile transformation is an ambition to come closer to the customer (Jerbrant and Lilliesköld 2018). Other reasons for undergoing agilization is according to Jerbrant and Lilliesköld (2018) a need to quickly develop products based on new technical opportunities as well as a desire to be able to recruit competent staff. As in most cases of change management, challenges do arise as agile transformation is undertaken though. Yet other challenges surface as the transformation has been carried through and the new ways of working are settling in.

What is now becoming apparent is that there seems to be a challenge in staying innovative in agile organizations. This challenge brings to mind the classical dichotomy between exploring new ideas and effectively executing predetermined activities. This is something March (1991) theorized on as organizational ambidexterity. Organizational ambidexterity points to the ability to *exploit* current capabilities to compete effectively in the market and to simultaneously nurture the ability to *explore* and develop new capabilities (March 1991), and has been known to be connected to agile theories previously (c.f. Lindskog & Magnusson 2021). With this in mind, we wonder if agile ways of working emphasize the exploitative over explorative capabilities and ask: *How is innovation achieved in agile work and organizations?* There are many adjacent queries to ponder, and we are more than willing to discuss the research question based on your interests and suggestions.

Approach

In order to study innovation in agile work we propose a qualitative approach. The research group has well-established connections with industry partners which enables a multitude of interviews with people doing agile work. Thereto, making participatory observations would be

a plausible method for gathering empirical material. This requires the students to take an active part in setting up an observation study.

A literature reviewed should be undertaken in parallel with collecting the empirical data. Literature connected to the project could include, but is not limited to, project management, innovation, organizing of (agile) work, organizational ambidexterity, change management. The study can be done from various perspectives, such as studying work, organizations, projects etc.

The connected research group will function as a reference group where the students are expected to present their ongoing work and discuss the emerging findings. The students are encouraged to further make suggestions on the process for undertaking the work.

References

Jerbrant, A. & Lilliesköld, J. (2018). Challenges face by large organizations implementing agile practices. *R&D Management Conference*, Milan, Italy

March, J. G. (1991). Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning. *Organization Science*, *2*(1), 71-87. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2.1.71

Lindskog, C. & Magnusson, M. (2021). Ambidexterity in Agile software development: a conceptual paper. *Journal of Orgnizational Effectiveness,* 8(1), 16-43. DOI 10.1108/JOEPP-07-2019-0068

Contact

Interested students should contact Charlotta Linse (clinse@kth.se) or Joakim Lilliesköld (joakiml@kth.se) to discuss their project ideas. When contacting us, please include your description of how you would like to undertake the project, what literature fields you would prefer working with and potential connections with industry that you could activate to engage in the study. All ideas for the development of thesis projects are encouraged and welcomed.