

# Agile Principles and Structures at Ryte

*By Lisa Tafelmeyer & Andreas Bruckschlägl*

## **Never stop inventing**

Since its inception in July 2012, Ryte has grown significantly by drawing on its own financial resources. We are proud of this accomplishment.

How did we get there? We have brought together a team of experienced experts and young high potentials. All were keen on showing the major market players what we are capable of. We were fast. Really fast. We churned out projects at a rate that made our competitors' heads spin. Rumour has it that one day the CTO of a market player even threw a cup through his office because we launched features and marketing campaigns without a pause.

Like most start-ups and long-established companies, with personnel growth, we have implemented a traditional organizational structure: a division into specialized departments (marketing, development, business development, etc.) and vertical reporting (the "Junior" reports to the "Head of department x" who in turn reports to the "Managing Director"). This led to each team working more and more independently, resulting in an increasingly narrow focus. Employees from different specialized departments communicated less and less, and ultimately projects were implemented at a much slower pace – and that even though we worked just as much and just as hard as at the beginning of our company history. The speed that had allowed us to grow over the past four years decreased with the growth of the team. In an international market, which is in the midst of the digital revolution, a so-called "lame duck" will not last long. There are several examples in the market...

In our digital world, all companies that create digital products for millions of users worldwide are in an extraordinary situation. Our industry is only 15 to 20 years old, which means it is still very young compared to all others. In young industries, it is always the one who is willing and capable of changing permanently in all areas as fast as possible while focusing on products that make life easier and change it.

We quickly realized: to keep our original speed, to grow healthy, and to create sustainable jobs, we need a dynamic structure.

So what was more evident to a technology pioneer than taking a look behind the scenes of the world's most successful tech start-ups? Thanks to our co-founder and advisory board member Niels' long-term relationship with the Spotify co-founder Martin Lorentzon, we encountered a paper in which their agile organizational structure is described in detail. After reading it, we quickly realized that we, as an organisation, needed a similar, innovative, agile structure, which puts our products (and not the hierarchy) back at the heart of our company.

### **Fail fast - learn faster**

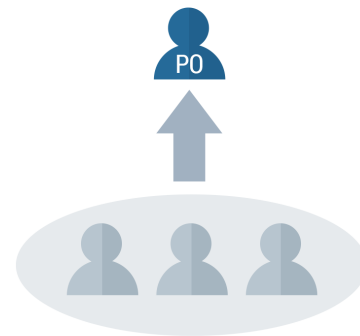
Overnight (no kidding), we said goodbye to our old structure and established a new one. The objectives of the new Ryte organization are:

1. Full throttle on our products: Establishment of a 100% production-oriented organization to realize our vision.
2. Empower the team: Each employee should be able to contribute their ideas to improving the product easily and in an unfiltered manner. Entrepreneurial thinking and behaviour are encouraged and desired - by each of us.
3. Full transparency: Everything we do is transparent to every employee. It is all about the product. We act and communicate openly and honestly, because trust is the launch pad for innovative ideas.
4. A culture that is fun: We are **humble, helpful, and result-driven** in every situation. We live and breathe these values on behalf of our colleagues, customers, and the industry.
5. Our credo is: **Change is our DNA!** We act like a living self-regulating organism, which constantly questions and renews itself. Our adaptability gives us an edge in the global market. This is necessary to be successful in our field of business.

# The New Agile Structure of Ryte.

The bases are so-called Squads and Chapters.

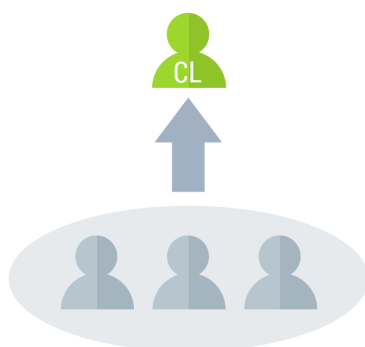
**Squads** are basically mini start-ups within Ryte. They physically sit together as a team and have all the skills and tools they need to develop the particular product. Their common goal is to produce the best product on the market. The basis for the development is the “release early, release often” principle. At Ryte, we do not fiddle about with project plans for features for months, but quickly build viable prototypes (minimal viable products), bring them to the market, constantly work on improvements, observe and question the resonance, and keep optimizing them.



**Important:** “We have always done it like this” is an alien concept for Ryte. By the way – writing this document, we follow the same principle: processes, instruments and structures are optimized on a daily basis and are continually adapted in this document.

Each Squad is learning more every day. Everyone in a Squad actively contributes their ideas. Loosely based on the motto “May the best idea (and not our ego ;-)) win!” Together, Squad teams develop the roadmap and derive goals (measurable through KPIs) and OKRs.

Squads consist of no more than 10-15 people, as otherwise agility and speed fall by the wayside. Should a Squad grow too big, another Squad will be formed, driving a particular part of the product or something completely new.

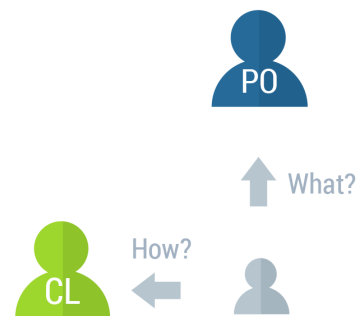


**Chapters** are the specialist home base of our new structure. Within a Chapter, employees share their professional knowledge. Team members, and thus their Squad, benefit from the experience and expertise pool of their own Chapters. Thus, the wheel does not have to be reinvented whenever when somebody else has successfully solved a similar problem in another Squad.

As a rule, Chapters should consist of no more than seven people. Otherwise, agility and exchange would be lost. If a Chapter grows too large, it is split into two Chapters, each of which has a more granular orientation.

**Product Owners (PO)** always have in mind **what** new products we are developing. They are therefore pursuing the further strategic development of the products and product ideas. They give guidance, are drivers of projects, recognize obstacles, and plan ahead. The PO is a product expert who is strategically brilliant and capable of churning out further developments with the team at a high frequency. He/she breathes

the “Think it, build it, ship it, tweak it” principle and makes decisions based on KPIs. He/she reconciles the advancement and development with the highest possible added value for our clients. The goal of a PO and thus also of the Squad is to go through the product development cycle as efficiently as possible, learn from it, and improve the product.



The PO is leading the **Product Council** and **Daily Stand Up Meetings** and ensures that all team members are optimally deployed according to their skills and abilities. He/she takes the entrepreneur’s role for the mini-start-up (Squad) and coordinates the roadmaps final with the **Steering Committee**. The PO is also responsible for the budget of his/her Squad. The PO is not the disciplinary superior of the team members, but exemplifies an understanding of leadership in the sense of agile leadership that calls for and promotes everybody contributing as an intrapreneur to Rytel.

**Chapter Leads** are responsible for the **how** beyond the Squads. They actively work in their subject field, e.g. frontend software engineering in a Squad. Otherwise, they would lose touch with practice and best practice innovations, which would compromise the currentness of OnPage quality standards as well as question their own function as a role model. Chapter Leads ensure that Squad team members use the most effective methods and efficient tools. They assume a professor’s role in their area of expertise and are mindful of technical excellence as well as to the observance of certain standards such as design, branding, code review processes, and other things.

On the one hand, Chapter Leads are responsible for the content development of their team. On the other hand, they actively promote the potential of the team members, are responsible for their high performance, and create a commitment- and exchange-oriented Chapter spirit. As disciplinary supervisors, they provide impulses for the professional as well as personal learning curve and develop high-performance teams. In the hiring process, the Chapter Leads make sure that a new colleague fully comprehends the technical aspects and their personality fits into the planned team development. This is how they bring necessary new know-how to the party.



**The Steering Committee** is comprised of the directors of Ryte. The product owners regularly submit their current roadmaps. The Steering Committee ensures that the roadmaps are consistent with the company's vision and strategic orientation. In addition to the disciplinary supervisor function for the Chapter Leads and POs, in their role as leaders, they also take on a mentoring function for personal development. The Steering Committee represents the company, assumes an exemplary role for the topic of feedback and communication culture, calls for suggestions for improvements from all company members, as well as external feedback on best practice in corporate governance.

**Small, dynamic, high-performance teams** are an essential element of our agile organization. Therefore, from a certain size, Squads and Chapters split up, and a new Squad/Chapter is formed. New positions, topics, and challenges continuously break forth for these newly emerging units. Wherever possible, the doors are open for new tasks at Ryte. That way different subjects, projects, and positions can be assumed within our organization. This goes hand in hand with our aspiration to challenge high-potentials at Ryte in the long run, to promote them, and to allow everyone to write their personal success story as an intrapreneur.

## Global Planning Tools

Our mission and our concrete corporate objectives are derived from our vision. They are designed for a 12 months period and show the direction. As there are daily internal and external influences, it is necessary that we continuously align our company objectives with these circumstances and adjust them if necessary. We communicate the current corporate goals for the next 12 months as the cornerstone of the subsequent Roadmap and OKR planning, always four weeks before the end of the quarter.

**Roadmaps** are the strategic "golden thread" for the following three months. They pursue the corporate objectives and connect the strategic with the operational level. The motto for every Roadmap is **THINK BIG!** It defines objectives and provides benchmarks for the assessment of the implementation of the Roadmap. Projects and ideas that cannot be implemented during the coming quarter for resource-related reasons are stored in the backlog and checked regularly for their potential for the optimization of current topics.



### Roadmap Process:

All team members of a Squad meet for a whole day for a joint Roadmap workshop shortly after the company's targets have been announced. With the company's objectives in mind, each team member should contemplate the Roadmap beforehand. During the workshop, depending on the size of the Squad, we work out together or in smaller teams which projects can contribute

to the achievement of the company's objectives. Each project is outlined in a short user story and then presented to the squad. If the majority of the squad declares the project to be meaningful, it is bindingly included in the Roadmap.



After the Roadmap Workshop, the Product Owner pitches it to the Steering Committee. It can postpone, evaluate, add, or cancel projects in the Roadmap. The goal of this negotiation process is to ensure the maximum impact on the company's objectives through mutual evaluation.

**Objective Key Results** are the personal goals of each employee at Ryte. They consist of Objectives and Key Results (milestones). The goals are inspiring and challenging. The milestones describe the very concrete, measurable part of the objectives. Based on them it is possible to objectively assess whether the objectives have been achieved and how the results are evaluated at the end of the quarter.

### OKR Process:

Based on the roadmap, each employee drafts a proposal of their OKRs and present them to their Chapter Lead. If the latter approves of the proposal, he/she submits the OKRs of all members of his/her Chapter to the Steering Committee. At this stage, it is possible that in consultation with the Chapter Lead adjustments are made due to overlaps or strategic priorities. The goal of this proposal process is to ensure the maximum impact for the company's objectives through feedback and strategic alignment.

Moreover, the participatory OKR process ensures that the set goals and implemented projects make a maximum impact on the personal and professional development of each team member in the long run. Subsequently, a final version is prepared and entered into a spreadsheet containing all the OKRs of every employee. This should be implemented no later than five days before the start of the next quarter so that each

team member can work full-throttle on achieving the respective goals from the first day of the new quarter. The final version of all OKRs, including those of the managing directors, is transparent and accessible to each team member as it is shared with the entire team.

Company OKRs Q4				
Confidence Level	Grading Forecast	Key Result	Crossfunctional Alignment	Support Function
<b>Objective 1</b>				
0.5	o	Key Result 1		
0.5	o	Key Result 2		
0.5	o	Key Result 3		
0.5	o	Key Result 4		
<b>Objective 2</b>				
0.5	o	Key Result 1		
0.5	o	Key Result 2		

As an innovative pioneer, we must always consider the latest trends. This is why continued training is an integral part of the OKRs. The topic of training, as well as the evaluation and consideration of new trends, technologies, and standards, is discussed with the Chapter Lead when the OKR is drawn up. Each member of the team presents what they have learned in the OKR presentations to their Chapter during our internal trainings, especially to the junior staff or comprehensive interest groups.

The individual OKRs are used to derive Chapter OKRs and corporate OKRs. All OKRs are accessible to all employees. Corporate OKRs are clear objectives with appropriate Key Results for the coming three months, which link the operational level with the strategic corporate objectives.

Depending on projects in which individual contributions cannot be assessed fairly, since the results of the team effort cannot be broken down, in certain cases, there are team OKRs instead of individual OKRs, as far as it is advantageous for the project result. Actions speak louder than words.

## Meeting Structure as a Planning Tool

Of course, we want to drive things forward and not sit in meetings all day. Yet, it is important to coordinate current projects or figures on a regular basis or receive updates and feedback. Our structure thrives on **clear communication**. At Ryte, we try to hold as few meetings as possible and as many as necessary. In the sense of Simplify your Company-Life, we also try to create a meeting structure that combines the need for reconciliation in the shortest possible way with successful smart work and distinguishes agility clearly from chaos. Therefore, our meeting structure is handled by all Squads and Chapters as equally as possible. At all meetings, the "**Open Door Policy**" prevails.

This means that every Superhero can attend any meeting. Our meeting structure also promotes the idea that different persons of contact can and should be brought in at any time, to contribute their feedback – with or without an official meeting (also in a short and direct way). At our meetings, we often experience that the set time is not fully utilized, and our team members can bring each other up to speed with just a few sentences everyone needs to implement the next tweak right the next moment.

On the one hand, this is due to the higher frequency of the exchange and the short communication paths. On the other hand, this fact also disproves the notion that in an agile structure people often spend too much time in meetings. The opposite is the case. When employees live and breathe their projects and can independently implement their ideas, communication becomes an autonomous tool and extremely efficient. This type of communication that, at times, feels almost telepathic and makes high-performance teams more successful.

## Daily

### Daily Stand Up (about 1 minute per team member)

In the Daily Stand Up, every member of a Squad reports briefly and concisely what he/she is working on, where dependencies exist, and where he/she needs support or can offer help. It is mandatory for all members of a Squad.



## Weekly

Monday is our meeting marathon day, where our weekly meetings take place. It has proven useful to hold all important, regular meetings on Monday so that for the rest of the week, we can dig into projects and focus on your goals.

### Weekly SC (approximately 30 minutes)

First, a Jour Fixe takes place with the Steering Committee. In this Jour Fixe, the Steering Committee will exchange information on the most important events of the previous week and the upcoming week.



#### Weekly SC, PO & CL (approximately 30 minutes)

Afterward, the Steering Committee, the POs, and the Chapter Leads will also discuss the most important events (on company-, Squad and Chapter basis) of the previous week and the upcoming week.

#### Weekly XY Squad (approximately 60 minutes)

On Monday morning, there is also a weekly Jour Fixe in each Squad, where members of each Squad's Chapter can inform each other of the Squad's important figures, events, and projects of the upcoming week. In the center is the "what?".

#### Weekly XY Chapter (approximately 45 minutes)

In the afternoons, the weekly Jour fixes of each Chapter take place, in which all members of a Chapter discuss the "how?", i.e. tools, procedures, or applied languages or systems of current and upcoming projects.

### **Biweekly**

#### Scrum (approximately 60 minutes)

The Scrum meetings take place at two-week intervals. The PO and DEV discuss their Sprints. In the beginning, the team presents the results of their work live on the system (review) to the product owner and all interested stakeholders and collects feedback (opinions, suggestions for improvement, praise, and criticism). Then Sprint Planning takes place. It is used to create the work package of the Scrum team for the next Sprint (Sprint Backlog). All tasks are already described in detail so that the effort is estimated solely based on DEV. Then the tasks are packed into the Sprint by priority.

After each Sprint, a Sprint Review is also held to exchange feedback between the DEV team and the PO to discuss what has been going well and where is a need for improvement to capture and eliminate possible frustration potential both in direct collaboration as well as the organization from the start.

To make the work between PO and DEV efficient, we carry out a Backlog Refinement Meeting between the Sprints. Proposals for solutions to existing user stories are developed and discussed. We are debating the granularity of the user story: "Is it divided and defined so far that it can be scheduled for implementation in the Sprint? Is it ready?". If a requirement is completed, an effort estimate is also carried out here.

## **Monthly**

### Monthly XY Squad BizPlan Update (approximately 45 minutes)

At the beginning of each month, Andi meets with each product owner individually to compare the figures achieved with the projected figures. If there are negative deviations, an action plan is developed by the respective product owner.

### Monthly Company Update (approximately 30 minutes)

Once a month, a Monthly Company Update takes place. The figures of the previous month in comparison with the projected figures and current projects as well as relevant information are presented to the entire team.

### Monthly All Hands Squad Update (approximately 60 minutes)

Once a month, a Squad Meeting is held, in which all the members of a Squad present their current projects. This meeting is very helpful and efficient to keep the entire team informed, giving each member the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback on all relevant projects.

## **Quarterly**

### Quarterly Strategic Update (approximately 45 minutes)

In the Quarterly Strategic Update, the company's corporate objectives for the next 12 months are communicated. You may wonder why we not only announce the upcoming quarter but 12 months. It is in the DNA of Ryte that we throw the spear further than we can actually go. This allows us, on one hand, to develop a far-sighted view of the project planning and, on the other hand, we do not impose any unnatural limits.





## Documentation

As it is no longer possible for all team members to be present at the meetings due to external appointments, leave, or illness, a meeting summary with the most important information will be sent to the respective participants. The topic, the date, the participants, and the results/to-dos are listed in the overview for all participants.

## Other Instruments

Squad Dependencies can arise through projects involving several Squads. To have an overview, there is a sheet in which these projects are recorded, and it is documented whether the projects are running smoothly or if there are any problems. This helps the Steering Committee to identify projects that need support.

**Quarterly Review:** The goal of the new structure is to be able to develop products quickly. To ensure this, it is important that each Squad is as autonomous as possible and there are only a few dependencies between the Squads that can slow the process down.

Once a quarter, team members are asked to participate in a small survey. It asks what is going well so far, what is unchanged, and what has slowed down/obstructed/blocked them in their projects. Constructive criticism, with the goal to improve even more is important. This helps us to understand what we still have to work on. It is a process that is never completed and constantly changes with new ideas and circumstances.

**Job Descriptions:** In OnPageVault (our intranet), each employee has their own profile. It includes the Job Description, where goal, core mission (primary tasks), and secondary mission (additional tasks) are also documented. In a larger organization, a current job description is necessary so that each team member knows who is responsible for what. Especially in an agile structure, it is important that decisions can be taken responsibly, since Squads as mini start-ups are so strong because of their independence. Furthermore, job descriptions help with the growth, internal development wishes of our team members, and the necessary potential for filling new positions with a long-term view and, of course, within the scope of the possibilities.

Each employee profile also contains important information such as Squad and Chapter membership, e-mail, and telephone number as well as achievement of the OKRs. Successfully implemented projects, additional team involvement, certifications, and external expert invitations are also recorded. This is how every Superhero can proudly look back on their personal company history and their contributions to the growth and success of Ryte, and create plans for individual development together with the Chapter Lead. Personal information e.g. hobbies makes it also very easy for new colleagues to fit into the team on a personal level and to discover commonalities in the shortest time possible.

## **Think it, build it, ship it, tweak it**

We have introduced the agile organization in one night. Instead of tinkering around for a long time, after intensive consideration, we decided to simply try it. Due to the introduction, our output has risen again, and the flood of ideas and creative solutions came back. According to the motto "Today's solution gives birth to tomorrow's problems", the growing organization has to be continuously optimized. Our goal is, on the other hand, to provide a clear, transparent structure for agile work in which processes, on the other hand, are not strictly adhered to for their own sake without reflecting on their usefulness for the desired result.

For example, it may be a good thing that new colleagues need more time to clarify all the technical requirements in the Daily Stand Up or that for very small projects it is not necessary to write up stories. Everyone is invited to use our tools at Ryte smartly and to avoid bureaucratization by applying common sense and a long-term perspective for consequences and exceptional results. Only then is it possible for us to maintain our crucial speed. If you have ideas, wishes, or suggestions for improvement, just talk to Andi or Lisa.

*Big Thanks to Spotify for the inspiration*

# Glossary

A small glossary of terms that you might run into

**Agile Software Development:** (lat. agilis: nimble, agile) The goal of agile software development is to make the software development process flexible and trim. Agile software development enables the quick release of new tools and features as well as flexible adjustments. The focus is solely on achieving the best results for our (new) products – faster than the competition. As a company that has initially emerged from a product idea, agile project thinking and an iterative approach is in our DNA.

**Backlog:** A backlog works like a noticeboard for ideas, features, tools, and projects. They are prioritized and defined by the Product Owner.

**Product Backlog:** In the Product Backlog, the properties of the product to be developed are listed by priority. Here, requirements can be removed or added. The requirements are processed in descending priority.

**Sprint Backlog:** The Sprint Backlog defines the work of the team for each individual Sprint. It includes the requirements selected from the Product Backlog. In the Sprint Backlog, all tasks that are still open to achieve the goal of the Sprint are compiled on a regular basis.

**Iterative:** In an iterative mind-set, we work our way forward step by step. A first draft is continuously tested, revised, and improved. Different phases are performed in several loops. This way, it is possible to quickly respond with adaptations and innovations to complex conditions that cannot be foreseen to the minute detail. What's behind all this? "Flow thinking". Iterative project management differs significantly from static project planning. That does not mean running off in a haphazard way but plans that explicitly take into account a constantly changing environment. Through the iterative approach, each of our projects is automatically subject to a continuous improvement process that promotes continuous learning.

**Scrum:** Scrum is an agile form of project management. It originally comes from software development but is now used everywhere where you want to promote fast, dynamic, and flexible projects. In Scrum, the underlying hypothesis is that production and development processes are so extensive that the individual phases, as well as work steps, cannot be planned in advance. However, if a team organizes itself according to defined guidelines, this leads to be more effective.

**Scrum Master:** Throughout the process, the Scrum Master ensures that rules are followed, monitors the status/progress, and as a Servant Leader, supports the

collaboration as well as the communication conducive to the process (also with other departments).

**Sprint:** A Sprint is an iteration in which one task package is completed without further modification.