AGILE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT FOR PROJECT TEAMS IN BUSINESS PRACTICE

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Purpose: This article focuses on conflict management as an important aspect of team management that may reduce the benefits of a given project. Due to the constantly changing business environment and the need for organisations to be flexible in their operations, traditional methods of project management are becoming less and less suitable. As a result, agility in management is gaining recognition.

Design/methodology/approach: The empirical research presented in the article was carried out using quantitative and qualitative methods. Expert interview techniques were also used, and quantitative research also involved the use of a questionnaire. The use of two research techniques was aimed at obtaining a broader view of the methods of agile conflict management used when implementing projects.

Findings: The research pointed to conflict management styles and methods often used by agile project teams within small and medium-sized enterprises. However, it is not exclusively dedicated to the agile approach. In addition, the results highlight the relationship between team characteristics and problem-solving methods. the key to the success of the project is the selection of team members to meet an important condition of agile project management, i.e. self-organisation and team management. This is the starting point for making the right selection of tools and methods when solving problems. It is very important that it is a small, interdisciplinary team of professionals. In agile project teams, the most common cause of conflicts is communication errors. Teams prioritise conflicts and take action to resolve them as quickly as possible. Time and dialogue are important determinants of conflict management. Experts point out that the best way to deal with a conflict depends on the type of conflict.

Research limitations/implications: An important question arising from the research is as to whether the existing conflicts can become an instrument of process and organisational innovations in small and medium-sized enterprises? Another prospect for continuing research is the possibility of involving a larger number of participants from agile teams.

Originality/value: The article draws attention to the issue of agile project management within small and medium-sized enterprises, which is an issue rarely discussed. the article contains conflict resolution tips addressed to agile project teams.

Keywords: conflict, project management, agile management, project team.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Project teams operate in a constantly changing environment, both near and far. In order to skilfully cope with challenges and turbulent environments, it is extremely important to have the right knowledge, skills and competences. The sphere of human resources management in a project team has been identified by the Project Management Institute, established in 1969, as one of the ten most important areas of knowledge necessary for project team management (Klemens, Szewczuk-Stępień, 2018, p. 45).

Managing project teams is currently one of the most critical managerial competencies. Although the nature of projects varies widely, one thing they all have in common is the need for effective decision-making. What is crucial to a project team - and this concerns their ability to make decisions effectively and achieve their goals - is their ability to manage conflicts. In some cases, conflict actually enables teams to make better decisions; in other cases, conflict intensifies negative experiences, causes worse decisions to be made or completely precludes any decisions, thus stopping project goals from being achieved.

The article attempts to determine whether there are conflict management methods dedicated to agile project management for business practice. First of all, the sources of conflicts were diagnosed, which should determine the way problems are solved. The research was conducted on a group of respondents who are members of project teams and experts who use agile project management methods within the small and medium-sized enterprise sector. The results obtained emphasised the importance of the project team in the agile approach to project management and the team's ability to organise and manage itself when dealing with conflicts and thus solve them and prevent them re-occurring in the future. On the one hand, this gives you freedom of action; on the other hand, it also requires extensive knowledge and experience in the field of project team management. The results also highlighted issues requiring further research. Interestingly, the lack of any indication of conflict resolution methods in the guidelines for the agile approach is assessed both positively and negatively by the respondents.

2. Conflicts within project teams – a literature review

Conflict, as described in today's management literature, is inevitable in teamwork. Every undertaking of this kind must provide for procedures for finding creative, positive solutions to it in the form of principles and rules. This prevents its destructive effects (Kryński, Miller, 2016, p. 303).

Conflict is a social situation in which conflicting interests, attitudes and values of at least two individuals and/or groups functioning within the same organisation come into contact with each other, resulting in them behaving in a specific way (Rummel-Syska, 1990; Trotsky et al., 2011; Dana, 2004; Kisielnicki, 2011; Pocztowski, 2007; Połonowska, Suszko, Moczydłowska, 2023). The parties to the conflict are dependent on each other, and their relation49s are accompanied by strong emotions. In the relevant literature on the subject, researchers report that conflict is an inseparable element of a team's daily work (Tjosvold, 2008; Skalik, 2009; Müller et al., 2016; Luo, Lu Lei, 2020; Mizser, 2022). The way in which team members deal with conflicts significantly affects their performance, which can be positive or negative (Yousefii et al., 2010; Liu, Cross, 2016; Prieto-Remóni et al., 2015; Sielska, Lončar, 2022). Conflicts affect team performance (De Dreu, Gelfand, 2008; Jehn, Mannix, 2001; Tjosvold, 2008) and must be adequately addressed to obtain the desired results (De Dreu, Beersma, 2005, pp. 105-117).

In the literature, there are various classifications of conflicts that arise during the implementation of projects, including team conflicts. Due to the project life cycle, a number of different types of conflicts may occur within a project team (Kozina, 2017, p. 102). These include conflicts determined by the objectives of the activity, occurring against the background of tasks and functions, concerning human resources, related to the use of material resources, resulting from the grouping of elements of the organisation, arising within functional dependencies, appearing within hierarchical dependencies, deriving from decision-making powers or caused by the formalisation of activities. T.R. Kurtzberg and J.S. Mueller (2005) argue that there are three main types of conflict:

– process-related conflicts relating to the way work is done as well as the duties, roles and responsibilities of team members,

– relationship conflicts caused by interactions between team members,

– Task conflicts, i.e. disputes over a work-related task.

T.R. Kurtzberg and J.S. Mueller (2005) argue that task-based conflicts can have a positive effect on team performance, while process and relationship conflicts can have a negative impact. On the other hand, K. Ohbuchi and M. Suzuki (2003) divide team conflicts into: conflicts of interest (concerning issues between people and their interests), cognitive conflicts (when people have different views) and conflicts of values (concerning different values or expectations).

Proper management of the project and the project team enables you to avoid many potential sources of conflicts. The main areas in which conflicts arise within project teams are: the division of goods, coordination of activities and exercising control over other people (Soroka-Potrzebna, 2021, p. 39). Therefore, among the potential sources of conflicts within a project team, the following are distinguished: the way resources are divided, the degree of interdependence of activities related to tasks, and the incompatibility of the goals of the project team members (Wachowiak et al., 2004, p. 155; Wyrozębski, 2021). Therefore, the assignment

of roles and responsibilities to the manager and members of the project team has a huge impact on the sources of conflicts. The so-called conflict circle is often used to analyse the sources of conflict. Ch. Moor distinguished five potential sources of conflict: conflict of relationships, data-related conflict, conflict of interest, structural conflict, and conflict of values (Przybyła, Biniasz, 2021, p. 21).

Effective conflict management in a project, in addition to assigning an assignee, also requires the use of the right conflict resolution style. R. Blake and J. Mounton (1964) distinguished five styles of conflict resolution, which have been analysed and described by many researchers (Ruble, Thomas, 1976; Thomas, 1992; Fuller, 1991; Casse, 1992; Lewicki et al., 1994; 1998; Kłusek, 2002; Bazerman, Neale, 1997; Dana, 1993; Stewart, 1997). These include:

– Competition: when one of the parties satisfies its own goals and interests without paying attention to the other side, usually leading to an exacerbation of the conflict.
– Adjusting: when one party gives up their own goals and interests in order to maintain a good relationship with the other party.
– Avoidance: when one party feels unable to exert pressure on the situation, which causes them to withdraw from the conflict. This style means not taking any action while waiting for the conflict to go away on its own.
– Compromise: when each party partially benefits and loses as a result of achieving of the goals and interests set for itself, balancing out existing differences.
– Style of cooperation – when the parties are looking for a solution that allows for the maximum implementation of the interests of both parties. This is a very effective style, as the parties are concerned with resolving the conflict, not with each other.

Differences in traditional and agile approaches to project management may suggest that different conflict management styles should be used.

The way in which a team is coordinated is also influenced by the method of conflict management, which also affects its performance along with the overall performance of the project (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1994; Stott, Walker, 1995; Mitropoulos, Cupido, 2009; Wielgus 2021; Wyrozębski, 2021). Three groups of conflict management methods are most often mentioned (Wajda, 2005; Kożuch, Cywoniuk, 2005; Potocki, 2005; Pocztowski, 2007; Wyrozębski, 2021):

– Stimulating conflict, which requires the acceptance of the conflict by the project manager. A distinction is made here between the introduction of changes to the process of communication, changes to the structure or other changes involving the use of the human factor.
– Limiting or suppressing conflict, which is most often done by uniting the parties, influencing their relations or using such actions as bribery, intimidation, isolation.
– Specific methods, among which the most frequently mentioned are domination, extinction or compromise.

The relevant literature also divides conflict management methods into traditional and modern ones (Soroka-Potrzebna, 2021, p. 40). Traditional methods include: procrastination, re-orientation, ignoring, depreciating, separating, coercing, compromise, fighting, peaceful coexistence, harmonisation and interference by third parties. On the other hand, modern methods most frequently mentioned in the literature include: setting a common goal, silent meetings, confrontational meetings, brainstorming, an image exchange session, random words and provoking doubts. J. Kisielnicki (2011) states that, in practice, mixed methods are most often used – for example, combining cooperation with negotiation or negotiation with fighting. Both traditional and agile approaches refer to conflict management methods.

3. Research method

A systematic analysis of the relevant literature has shown that the topic of conflict management in project teams has been discussed by many researchers. A review of databases (including Scopus, Web of Science, Elsevier) has found over 600 publications on this topic. An analysis of these publications in terms of the research area and the timeliness of the data presented indicated that only 17 of them pertain to agile conflict management in project teams. However, most of them focus on one selected type of project or a specific project. On the other hand, no publications discussing agile conflict management within a project team in the SME sector were found, which indicates that there is a research gap.

The aim of the study was to identify methods of agile conflict management in project teams in small and medium-sized enterprises. This required a comparison of the working environment conditions of agile and traditional project teams. In view of the above, the following research questions were formulated:

Q1. What are the sources of conflict in agile project teams?

Q2. What conflict resolution styles are used in agile project teams?

Q3. What methods of agile conflict management are used in a project team?

This empirical research was conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods during the period from July to December 2023. Expert interview techniques were used (Konecki, 2000, pp. 169-190), while the quantitative research involved the use of a questionnaire. The use of two research techniques was aimed at obtaining a broad view of agile conflict management in project teams. In order to identify agile conflict resolution styles and agile conflict management methods, a list of conditions for the work of the project team was formulated. These conditions are grouped as follows: organisational culture, identification of the causes of conflicts, team members' approach to conflict, the role and competencies of team members and the team leader. To analyse the data obtained, the Moore conflict wheel, the Pareto-Lorenz diagram and the ABC method were used.

Enterprises from the small and medium-sized enterprise sector were invited to participate in the study, and the main variable in the selection of entities for the research sample was the location due to the region, i.e. the northern subregion of the Silesian Voivodeship and cooperation with the Częstochowa University of Technology for the commercialisation of knowledge in the region. The latter condition enabled the companies that carry out the projects to be taken into account. The survey was conducted via the interankiety.pl platform. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions with a 5-point Likert scale to assess individual phenomena, as well as explanations of key concepts and metrics. On the other hand, 31 experts took part in qualitative research, which made it possible to separate factors resulting directly from the agile methodology from those not related to it. These were specialists who manage projects on a daily basis, and 25 of them used only agile methodologies in project management.

The research was a pilot study, which made it possible to determine whether there was a need to modify the online survey questionnaire to make it clearer and more comprehensible. This, in turn, will make it possible to continue the study within a group of small and medium-sized enterprises based in the Silesian Voivodeship.

4. Presentation of research results

A total of 73 respondents took part in the quantitative research, including 54 who declared that they worked in agile project teams and 19 in "mixed" teams, which were managed using agile and traditional methods. The leading sectors were banking/ finance services and logistics (Table 1).

Table 1.
Study Group Characteristics

Project Team Size	Agile Team 74%			Mixed Team 26%	
Branch	IT 13%	Banking/Finance 46%		Automotive 7%	Logistics 34%
Project Team Size	1-2 People 5%	3-9 People 79%			Over 9 People 16%
Experience in Working with the Agile Approach	Under 1 year 3%	1-4 years 81%			Over 4 years 16%
Contact with Project Client	Direct 84%			Indirect 16%	

Source: Own Research.

When analysing the size of project teams, it was found that the vast majority (79%) of respondents work in teams of 3 to 9 people, which is in line with the assumptions of the agile approach. More than 80% have 1 to 4 years of work experience in working with the agile approach. This confirms that the research group has sufficient experience in the agile approach

to assessing the issues studied. One of the main conditions for organising the work of project teams using the agile approach is frequent and close contact with the client. The vast majority of the respondents, (over 80%) have direct access to the client, which is important in obtaining feedback on the project product.

The results also indicate that agile project teams prioritise conflicts and look for their root causes. Unfortunately, in "mixed" project teams, the prevalent approach is to react to conflicts only when they significantly affect the team's work. In order to identify the sources of conflicts, the Moore Conflict Circle was used, and on the basis of the results obtained, a Pareto-Lorenz diagram was created using the ABC method.
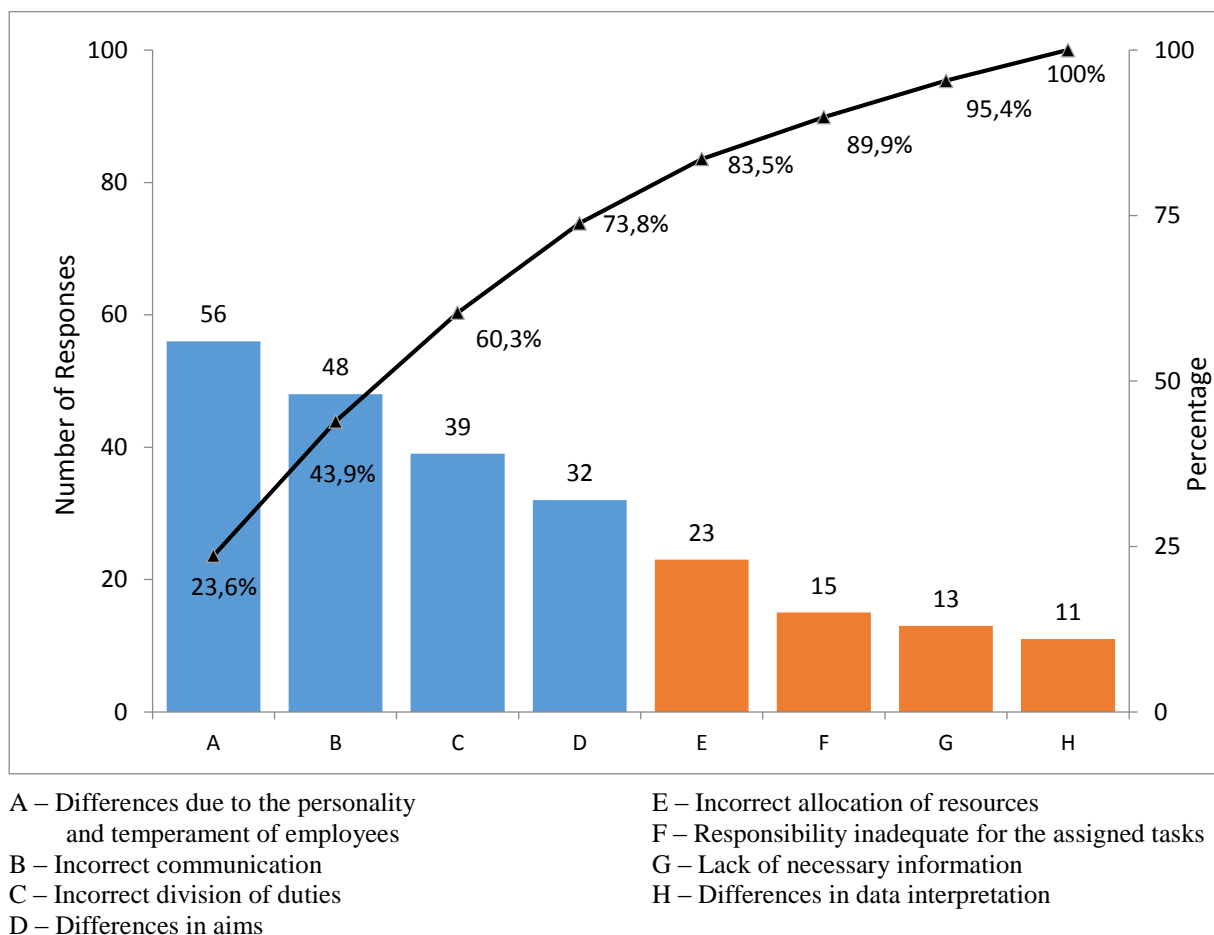

A – Differences due to the personality
    and temperament of employees
B – Incorrect communication
C – Incorrect division of duties
D – Differences in aims

E – Incorrect allocation of resources
F – Responsibility inadequate for the assigned tasks
G – Lack of necessary information
H – Differences in data interpretation

Figure 1. Pareto-Lorenz Diagram using ABC method for Key Causes of Conflict.

Source: Own Research.

On the basis of the importance analysis, it appears that there are four main causes or sources of conflicts within a project team (Fig. 1). The most significant causes of conflicts were differences resulting from the personality and temperament of employees and improper communication within the project team. So, we are dealing with a conflict of values and a conflict of relationships here. The next two reasons stem from the organisational structure of the team and interdependency between team members. The sources of conflicts identified have a significantly reduce the quality and effectiveness of the team's work. At the same time, the analysis of the obtained data shows that "mixed" project teams most often struggle with

a conflict of interest (89% of these teams), while 78% of agile teams struggle most with a conflict of relationships: 78% of them indicated improper communication.

The results of the study indicate that, in agile project management for conflict resolution, the team and its characteristics are crucial. Therefore, it is difficult to identify specific conflict resolution styles and conflict management methods that would be characteristic of the agile approach. First of all, the agile approach is about self-management of teams, in which members decide on all aspects of their work, including conflict management methods. The results of the study indicate that small teams of professionals with the ability to organise and manage themselves are particularly important here (Fig. 2). The independence of the team comes to the fore, as it determines the ability to select methods and techniques of conflict management for a given situation. Experts, i.e. people who use the agile approach to project management, highly appreciated the commitment of employees in achieving goals common to the team, their professionalism, self-organisation, clearly assigned responsibilities and a stable working environment. The latter is very important for preventing conflicts. Over 90% of the experts surveyed indicated that this was a procedure typical of agile teams.
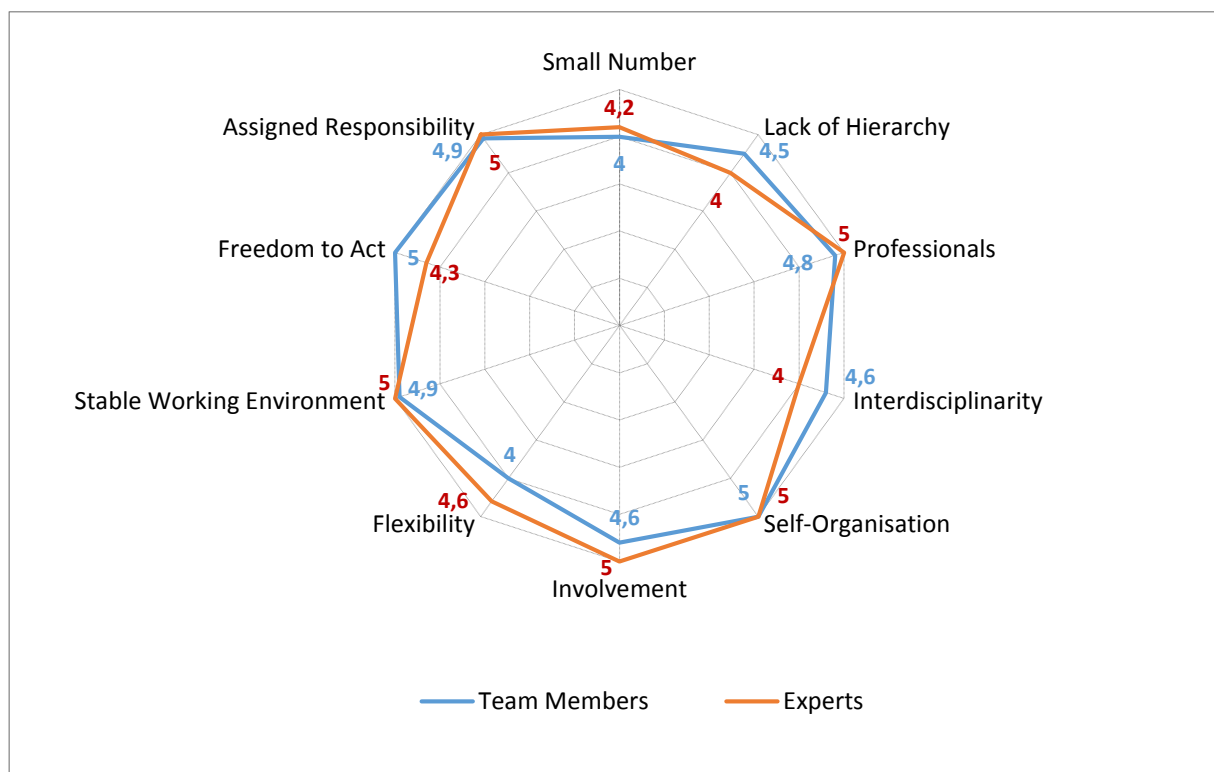

Figure 2. Important Features of a Project Team for Agile Conflict Management.
Source: Own Research.

The surveyed experts pointed to dialogue and cooperation as conflict resolution styles dedicated to agile project management (Fig. 3). They also pointed out that there was no guide or manual that indicates how to manage conflicts in agile project teams or listed methods or techniques that team members could use. On the other hand, they emphasize that conflicts are one of the most important topics of agile training, although they are not based on guidelines.

This explains why self-organisation and self-management are such important features of agile project teams. Interestingly, in "mixed" project team management, i.e. an approach that combines traditional and agile methods, the elements of competition and adaptation do not apply, while avoidance is used very rarely. Modern styles of conflict resolution are definitely predominant. This indicates that both the mixed and agile approaches take into consideration the need for dialogue in order to work out a common solution to a problem.
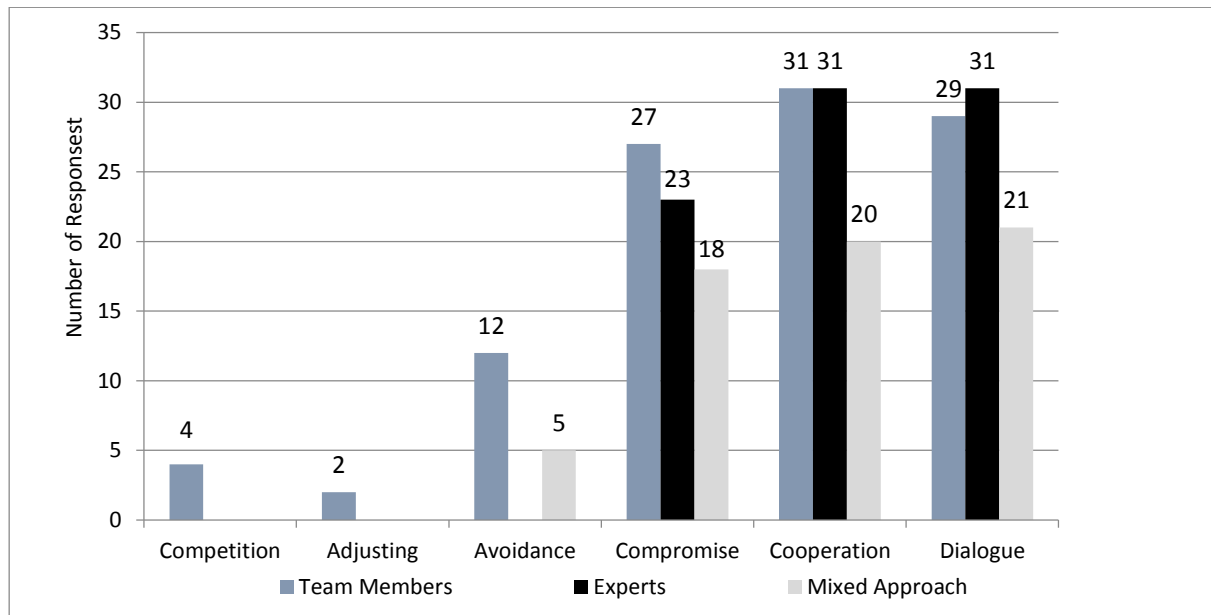

Figure 3. Conflict Resolution Styles in Project Teams.

Source: Own Research.

Experts point out that the best way to deal with a conflict depends on the type of conflict. This is reflected in conflict management methods. However, even in this case, they point out that the guidelines for the agile approach do not indicate any method that should be used by project team members. 78% of the experts surveyed indicated that this gave project team members complete freedom; at the same time, 63% of them suggested that, in order to resolve the conflict as quickly as possible, dialogue effectively narrows down this freedom. As a result, self-reliance once again stands out as an important feature of an agile team. 80% of experts indicated that agile teams worked with creative problem-solving procedures. Qualitative research has also shown that, in agile conflict management methods, the main aim is to assign an equal amount of responsibility to each member of the project team. When using the agile approach, teams should be small enough to make collaborative conflict resolution possible. That is why it is important to use methods that activate conflict resolution between team members. Most experts pointed to interpersonal training (68%) and discussion meetings (72%). These are methods in which dialogue is very important. At the same time, they highlighted a very important aspect of agile conflict management: It requires knowledge and extensive experience in project management, which is not yet common in the small and medium-sized enterprise sector.

5. Summary of Research Results

The results of the study presented in the article show the importance of conflicts in agile project team management. First of all, the key to the success of the project is the selection of team members to meet an important condition of agile project management, i.e. self-organisation and team management. This is the starting point for making the right selection of tools and methods when solving problems. It is very important that it is a small, interdisciplinary team of professionals.

In agile project teams, the most common cause of conflicts is communication errors. It was not possible to determine whether these errors related only to communication within the team or also to contacts with the project client. Teams prioritise conflicts and take action to resolve them as quickly as possible. Time and dialogue are important determinants of conflict management. Anticipating potential threats in the form of conflicts within a project team results in appropriate procedures, methods and tools being created to eliminate their occurrence and minimise their possible effects. The use of such practice in agile project teams has been indicated by the vast majority of experts. This may indicate that employees (and above all leaders) lack guidelines for agile conflict management in project teams. If so, this raises the question whether this is not only a problem for the small and medium-sized enterprise sector.

Cooperation and dialogue are the most important conflict resolution styles of agile teams, which, on the one hand, narrow down the methods of conflict management that can be used but, on the other hand, serve to creatively search for solutions to problems. So, another question arises as to whether the existing conflicts can become an instrument of process and organisational innovations in small and medium-sized enterprises? Another prospect for continuing research is the possibility of involving a larger number of participants from agile teams. So the study raised questions that confirmed the need to broaden the issues analysed and continue research into the relevant group of small and medium-sized enterprises.

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