

## Point of View

Agile performance  
during lockdown



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# Contents

Increased productivity	03
Is this the complete picture?	04
Foundation for navigating changes	05
Lockdown learning can improve performance in the future	06
Expanding the agile transformation	08
Top management support	09
Let's talk	10

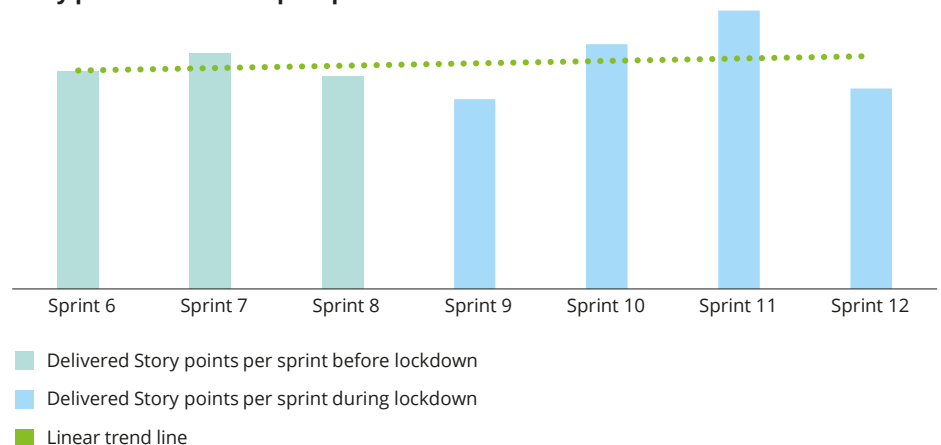
# Increased productivity

Agile ways of working promise to help organizations navigate better in changing environments. The corona lockdown has stress-tested this assumption. This case analysis of the agile ways of working at the financial services company Alm. Brand demonstrates that it is possible to maintain performance even in unforeseeable circumstances when employing an agile approach. The maintained performance demonstrates that agile ways of working do in fact enable navigating in changing environments. The analysis also highlights some dynamics and learnings that may inspire new ways of working after the lockdown.

The lockdown enforced in our society has had a huge impact on the way we work. However, Alm. Brand has managed to keep the performance of its agile teams high, and evidence even suggests that there is a slight increase in performance. Data is naturally still limited, but as figure 1 shows, Alm. Brand's agile teams have managed to remain stable and even slightly increase productivity when considering the amount of work completed per two-week timebox (sprint). Employees from different levels of the organization confirm the impression that performance is stable. A developer states:

“Yes, I believe **productivity has increased**. I've been more effective. My colleagues have been closer to me with the use of online tools, I'm less distracted, and I have fewer meetings than before. I hear the same from my colleagues in the team and other teams”.

Story points delivered – per sprint



However, though the teams produce the same or even more work, it does not necessarily mean that they deliver the same value or quality to the customers. While it has not been possible to collect conclusive data that positively demonstrate an increase in value during lockdown, the available data from Alm. Brand suggest that the slight increase in productivity is supported by at least a similar increase in quality. According to Alm. Brand's usability scores and upload time on its website, there has also been a positive trend with users rating their experience better than normal.

- Alm. Brand is a Danish financial service company. The primary domain of business for Alm. Brand is insurance and banking.
- 200 employees follow agile ways of working with teams that consists of people from different functional areas.
- Alm. Brand follow the so-called Spotify model for agile ways of working, which have guided them on deciding how to organize teams, which processes to follow and how meetings are facilitated.

## Similar trends in other companies

Other companies across industries that we have spoken to confirm the stable or even increasing trend in productivity during lockdown.

Though firm conclusions are difficult to make, the experience from many organizations is that productivity is similar to before the lockdown or might even have increased. One unifying reason is the access to appropriate virtual tools.

"At first, we experienced a decline in productivity when parents had to take care of their children while working, but after the reopening of schools and childcare, productivity increased to about the same as before the lockdown – even with teams working from home".

**Head of Development and Operations  
at Edlund A/S**

# Is this the complete picture?

Of course, there are nuances to the above-mentioned performance experienced at Alm. Brand. One may argue that the success in productivity is due to an increased focus on execution of already planned work and that this virtual way of working is not well suited for long-term planning, which we see when we, for example, execute program increment (PI) planning or big room planning. However, a leader at Alm. Brand who is responsible for several agile development teams has very positive experiences with planning and coordinating in the long term:

"We have also completed strategic planning and road maps, so **we have done all the same workshops to plan work** that we would've normally done; we simply just moved it online".

She even addressed the benefit of involving more people in the virtual session and having better tools for documentation.

# Foundation for navigating changes

Alm. Brand already had a solid agile foundation before the coronavirus lockdown hit. However, the company had to be careful not to revert to old habits. In the early days of the lockdown, the initial confusion brought management on the verge of abandoning the agile principles.

Responding to the sudden lock-down, meetings were set up to report on status in an attempt to stabilize the organization by controlling from the top. But this leadership behavior went against Alm. Brand's choice of delegating power to the teams so they themselves are responsible for acting and ensuring progress.

The teams, however, demonstrated their ability to maintain performance, which reassured management. Consequently, additional reporting was quickly phased out. According to director and agile transformation expert at Deloitte Kristian Hessler, this is actually an unusual pattern:

*"In many cases, teams would've responded differently to the change in management behavior. If the agile ways of working still feel new, most people are prone to revert to the comfort of the old habits when stressed. But the teams at Alm. Brand kept their confidence in the new ways, and **management was quick to regain its footing.**"*

He underlines that the case at Alm. Brand sticks out because the company managed to keep confidence in the agile model even in the extreme lockdown situation.

Alm. Brand benefitted from well-implemented ways of working and experienced agile teams. This helped when the unforeseeable circumstance rocked the foundation. A tribe (a team of teams) lead told us:

**"The work methods were already incorporated, and we already had well-functioning, stable teams with cross-functional capabilities, so when the lockdown came, it was not as big of a challenge to move virtually. We did the same things and stuck to our team ceremonies, just virtually".**

Alm. Brand had also delegated autonomy to the team level. Hence, when the lockdown came, the teams were not too dependent on other teams or on guidance from management. They were already used to figuring out solutions on their own and to have the mandate to make decisions independently. Furthermore, employees were already trained to facilitate meetings, and they had access to virtual tools. This was a huge advantage. One of the scrum masters explains:

*"The digital tools make it easier to prepare templates and guide meetings, so the quality of the team events has improved".*

The overall perception is that the lockdown has proven that the agile transformation has been the right choice for Alm. Brand. The lockdown can turn out to be a benefit for Alm. Brand in the long run as the manager for entrepreneurship and innovation states:

*"The belief in the agile transformation has been strengthened. We've succeeded through decentralization, strong teams, good relationships, and a decent technology stack. The whole process toward more digitalization and a data-driven culture has been accelerated".*

# Lockdown learning can improve performance in the future

The lockdown has shown some interesting results and learning that not just Alm. Brand but also others can learn from. The most noteworthy learnings are:

## 1. Online tooling: a prerequisite for moving online successfully

Online tools, such as Microsoft Teams, Jira, and Miro, were available in the organization before the lockdown, but they were not really used to a large extent. A developer admits:

*"The lockdown has really forced everyone to move online. It has really shown to be effective among the developers. Now we can just push a button and share content to all at once. Code can be shared instantly, and if I need help from someone, I don't hesitate like I used to when I had to walk a distance to get to the colleagues. Now I just ping them right away and get immediate answers".*

Documentation and compliance may now become easier as well. Co-creation is documented immediately, and compliance tasks are now faster to perform when using the tools more consistently.

## 2. Build flexibility into your teams

The possibility of working from home also means that it can be easier to balance family life and work. Time spent commuting is saved, and people who would otherwise not join meetings because of having to commute are suddenly showing up to contribute. Concentrated work may become easier at home when there are no distractions from other meetings or colleagues. Given, that the home work environment is quiet of course. A developer adds:

*"I hope we can have a mix of virtual and physical set-ups going forward, in which we have the social benefits of being physically together and the flexibility of virtual work some days".*

## 3. Reconsider your meeting culture

The virtual way of working has provoked a serious reflection on the amount of time spent on meetings. Most readers of this article probably recognize the experience of spending half a day in more or less fruitless meetings. At Alm. Brand, the employees have experienced the same at times. Agile team members report having attended fewer meetings during lockdown and being more critical as to which type of meetings they really needed to attend. This is a trend they would like to continue, which will leave more time to code production and other more value-adding activities.

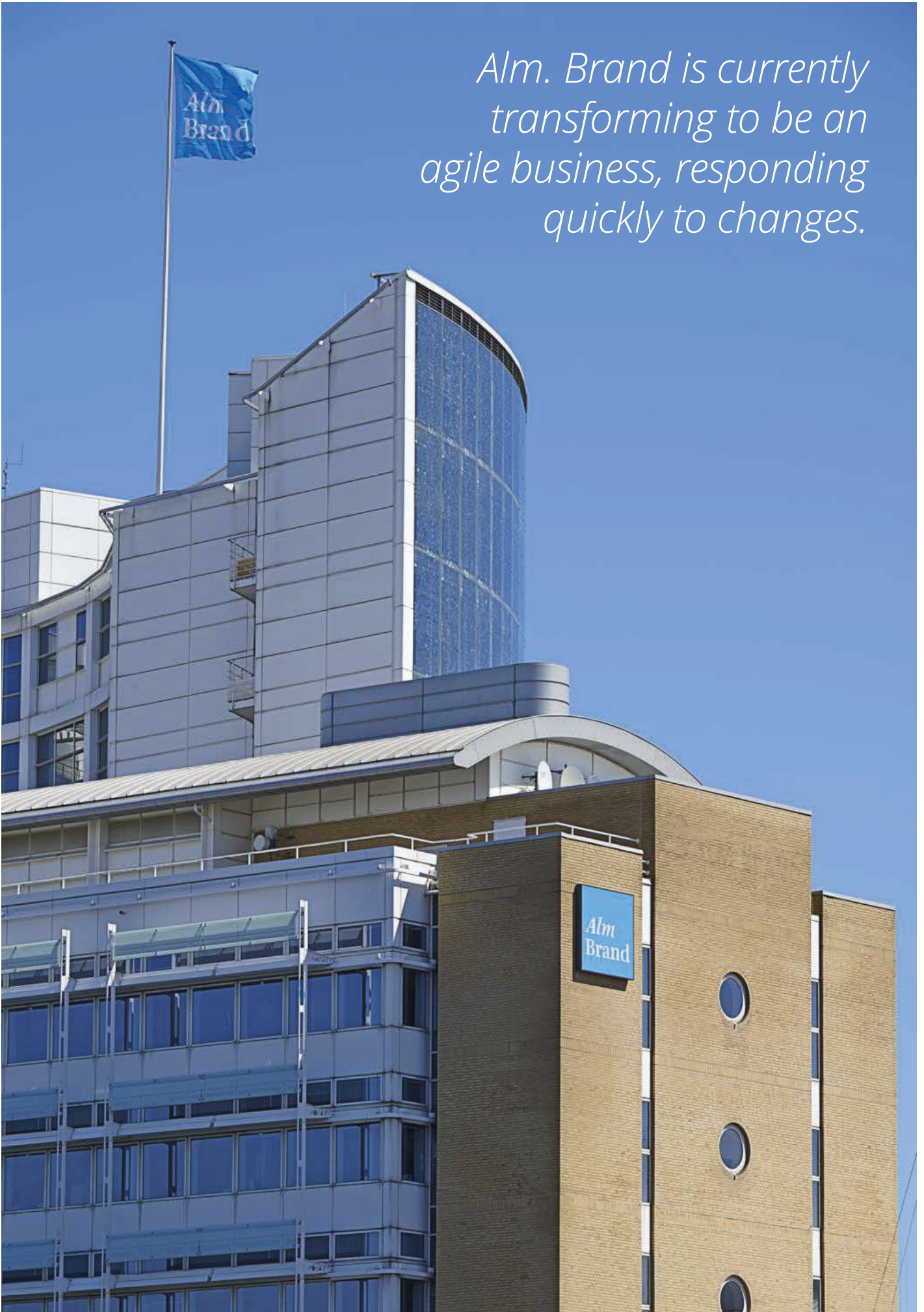
## 4. Social events online are OK

While it seems counterintuitive, it may be beneficial to move social events online at times. Alm. Brand has experienced great support for, for example, Friday bars during lockdown; colleagues have even got to know each other better than prior to the lockdown, as an agile instructor and a scrum master tell us:

*"I usually skip these Friday events because I'm a parent and have some commuting time, but now I can attend when it's virtual. I got to know my team much better in that one Friday bar than in the previous four-six weeks since I joined. When we have a Friday bar in the future, I will definitely prioritize it".*



*Alm. Brand is currently transforming to be an agile business, responding quickly to changes.*



# Expanding the agile transformation



The lockdown has proved to be a good case for Alm. Brand's agile ways of working. It has been a proper test, and so far, Alm. Brand seems to have passed successfully. The transition into new ways of working is, however, not over for Alm. Brand. The propensity to revert to old habits just as when the lockdown hit shows that the organization as a whole is not yet fully confident in its new ways of working. But the lockdown has been a valuable lesson. As the manager for entrepreneurship and innovation concludes:

He adds that the agile ways of working may even inspire how Alm. Brand will do corporate strategy in the future to navigate unpredictable changes:

“We cannot calculate everything; we need to take action to generate learning to inspire our thinking. We have learned things on the floor that **might be useful at a strategic level** as well”.

*“With the lockdown, our management and colleagues have now, to an extreme degree, experienced the importance of agility and virtual tools first-hand – a lesson we could never have forced them to learn and experience”*



# Top management support

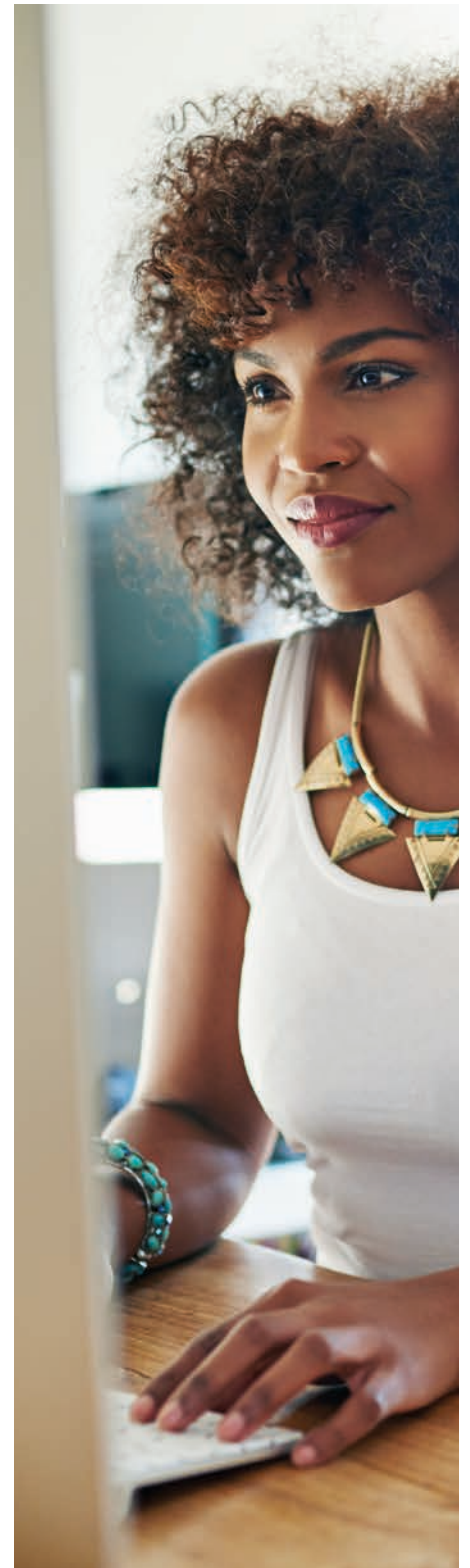
The corona-crisis is a good occasion to reflect on the impact of the agile ways of working, and according to COO and CDO Kristian Hjort-Madsen, there are also other more general signs that Alm. Brand are benefiting from the new ways of working.

He points to improving numbers in employee satisfaction surveys which he attributes to team autonomy; teams themselves making decisions, not their leaders. This is according to him also part of the reason for higher satisfaction among customers:

"We can document **higher satisfaction from our customers** especially around our digital solutions. We even launch solutions to the market at greater speed than before."

As part of top management he is able to make better decisions in the agile setup. This is because he participates in bi-weekly deom-meetings, where the teams demonstrate their latest deliverables and provide insights from customers.

*"In the top management we continuously become smarter, because the teams provide us with insights into specific customer needs."*



# Let's talk

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