Chapter 10
Turning Time from Enemy into an Ally Using the Pomodoro Technique

Xiaofeng Wang, Federico Gobbo, and Michael Lane

Abstract Time is one of the most important factors dominating agile software development processes in distributed settings. Effective time management helps agile teams to plan and monitor the work to be performed, and create and maintain a fast yet sustainable pace. The Pomodoro Technique is one promising time management technique. Its application and adaptation in Sourcesense Milan Team surfaced various benefits, challenges and implications for distributed agile software development. Lessons learnt from the experiences of Sourcesense Milan Team can be useful for other distributed agile teams to turn time from enemy into an ally.

10.1 Introduction

Time is a priceless and scarce resource for software development projects [4]. It is especially true in agile software development. A brief review of the 12 agile principles behind the Agile Manifesto reveals that time is an important dimension of agile processes, symbolized by terms such as “early”, “frequently”, “couple of weeks”, “daily”, “regular intervals” in these principles [2]. Agile teams work with short time-boxed iterations and need to maintain a fast yet sustainable pace throughout the project lifespan [3]. When moving to a distributed setting, the time dimension
Fig. 10.1 A tomato-shaped timer

is further complicated by issues such as time zones [6], geographical distance [7], and different cultures [1]. However, there is very little reported evidence of effective time management techniques applied in agile software development, especially in the context of distributed teams.

The Pomodoro Technique is a time management tool that was originally intended to optimize personal work and study. More recently, it has been widely applied by Italian agile teams [9]. Awareness of this technique is growing among the wider, international agile community (two tutorials on the Pomodoro Technique have been given in Agile 2009—the international conference). The technique is named after the usage of a common kitchen timer in the shape of a tomato (“pomodoro” in Italian, see Fig. 10.1). The heart of the Pomodoro Technique is 25 minutes of focused, uninterrupted work on one task, then 5 minutes of rest. There are also rules to keep the integrity of pomodoro, and tactics to deal with internal and external interruptions. However, starting as a personal time management tool, how is it applied by an agile team, especially when the team is working in a distributed environment? There is no ready answer in spite of the increasing popularity of the Pomodoro Technique in the agile community.

Based on this observation, the objective of our study is to provide a better understanding of the application of the Pomodoro Technique in agile teams, especially when they work in distributed contexts. To this end, we studied in-depth one agile team that has applied the Pomodoro Technique extensively. The team collaborates with other remote sites of the company where the Pomodoro Technique is not used. This allows us to reflect on the impact of the Pomodoro Technique (and the lack of it) in a distributed context.

The remaining part of the chapter is organized as follows. In the next section we review a set of time-related issues and argue the importance of time management in software development in general and agile software development in a distributed context in particular. It is followed by an introduction of the Pomodoro Technique. Then the experience of Sourcesense Milan Team using the Pomodoro Technique is presented. We analyse their experience and provide useful guidelines for implementing the Pomodoro Technique in the following section. The chapter ends with a conclusion section that highlights the contribution of our study and points out future studies.