

# Managing a distributed company

Lene Wagner <lene@merlinux.de>

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# Personal background

- Studied cultural sciences
- Participated in managing various youth and culture projects
- Implemented a collaborative project with > 50 People
- Accounting and financial planning
- Joined **merlinux** in 2004
- Managing director of merlinux

# Distributed company 1

- Distributed and collaborative approaches in an open source software company
- findings of our „work in progress“ attempts

# Company versus open source context

- Open source communities work distributed
- Common aspect with company organisation
  - Bunch of skilled people collaborating on software development
- But: in a company you have to handle commitments
  - Money
  - External Project plans
  - Customers
  - Formal requirements

# Distributed versus non-distributed company

- Common aspects:
  - Commercial activity
  - Customers
  - Commitments
  - Formal requirements
- Distinction:
  - No face to face communication
  - less fixed worktime and office structure
  - Few socialising

# Merlinux company structure

- 8 People distributed over Germany and Europe
- Co-heading with Holger Krekel
- Around 15 other companies plus various people to keep in close contact with from Netherlands, Sweden, France, Germany, Italy, Brazil...
- German company (GmbH /= Ltd.)
- Physically registered in Hildesheim

# Merlinux projects

- 2 large projects
  - Participation in PyPy on development and management (EU project consortium)
  - Reliable email certification service
- Other small and medium projects
  - Consultancies
  - Remote System administration

# The virtual office

- People work from their place of choice
- no coffee break talks
- Merlinix office consists of various communication channels
  - IRC „company“ channel and project channels
  - Voice over IP
  - Mailing list
  - Issue tracker
  - Central timetracking tool
  - Central repository for code and all other company data

# Employment structures

- Employees and freelancers
- Free time schedule
  - Free to schedule worktime
  - Needs to fit with company needs
  - But: major part of availability needs to be fixed and reliable
- Worktime account
- Travel reimbursement

# Collective processes

- **Goal:**
  - shared view on and responsibility for the company projects
  - Avoid „bottlenecked“ decision processes
  - Fair collaboration meeting the various interests involved

# Collective processes: sync-meetings

- Regular sync meetings on IRC (appr. twice a month)
- 30 minutes fixed
- Invitation and minutes
- People involved prepare topics
- Identify blockers and dependencies
- Update on project status, feedback
- Decisions about timings, priorities, company rules

# Collective processes: Sprints

- Experimenting with one-week merlinux sprints
- Participation in project specific sprints and conferences
- Pair programming
- Longer sync discussions about company practices and goals
- Evaluations: Feedback and conflict resolving
- Having fun

# Tracking and controlling work

- Issue Tracker
- Subversion repository structure
- Time tracking

# Tracking/controlling: Issue tracker

- Issues assigned to specific persons
- development and non-development issues
- Nosy list: who is involved
- Email notifications of each change
- Responsibility to take care of the issue
  - Responsible to keep track
  - Responsible for a result
  - Responsible for triggering/involving other persons
  - Responsible for reporting blockers and failures
- Co-responsibility of all „nosies“

# Tracking/controlling: Svn Repository

- Codebase and all other company data in versioned storage
- Email notifications with log messages of each change
- Collective insight into work in progress
- Collaborative work on issues

# Tracking/controlling: Timetrack

- Timetrack in central svn storage
- Employees responsible for writing down hours
- Updates latest ahead of each sync meeting
- Timetrack is database for worktime account

# Findings: distributed communication

- Reliability
  - Responsiveness
  - Precision
- Carefully consider channel and target group
- 'In Writing'
- Extensive use of the Issue tracker
- In case of conflicts: always assume communication problems first

# Findings: formal organisation

- Not stick to a formal model like: only on-site employees
- Rather focus on project / specific situation (be agile ;)
  - Identify formal needs
  - Find the applicable model
- Consultancies for free of charge
  - Chamber of commerce
  - National EU office
  - WWW

# Findings: The social aspect

- People work physically alone most of the time
- Less socialising
- Less „coffee break discussion“ about company and projects
- Need to explicitly request help/feedback
- No discipline from a formal worktime/office structure
- But: People can adapt workstyle to personal situations
- Make „meta (coffee break) discussions“ an institution
- Sprint meetings to get to know each other

# Pros and Cons distributed Company

- Pro
  - People appreciate working from where they want
  - Low barrier for good people to join the company
  - Connects very well to open-source contexts
- Con
  - A lot of formal consideration/work
  - Communication overheads, risk of misunderstandings
  - More difficult commitment organisation