

Insights into Kaizen Culture in Project Management Development Teams

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Abstract

Background: This paper examines factors influencing kaizen adoption in project management teams, emphasizing agile methods, employee engagement, organizational culture, and effective communication. **Objectives:** The aim of the research was to explore LS Retail employees' experiences with kaizen implementation in project management, assessing whether a kaizen culture exists and how agile practices support its adoption. **Methods/Approach:** A qualitative methodology was employed, involving semi-open interviews with 12 employees from three development teams at LS Retail. **Results:** The findings indicate that LS Retail's strong agile tradition has facilitated growing acceptance and support for kaizen. Implementation, however, varies significantly between teams. Notable challenges persist, particularly regarding communication flow, knowledge sharing, and kaizen training, especially within teams less experienced with kaizen methods. Addressing these challenges is essential to achieve a more consistent and effective kaizen implementation throughout the organization. **Conclusions:** The findings provide valuable guidance for organizations implementing kaizen in project management. Key success factors include fostering a supportive and flexible environment, continuous employee education and empowerment, and ensuring effective communication for consistent and successful kaizen adoption.

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Introduction

The principle of kaizen, meaning "continuous improvements", has been a fundamental aspect of achieving operational excellence in several sectors, especially in manufacturing. Kaizen, which originated in Japan, focuses on making tiny, gradual modifications that, when combined, result in notable enhancements in productivity, efficiency, and quality (Imai, 1986; Liker, 2021). Multiple studies have emphasized the advantages of kaizen, such as less waste, improved employee involvement, and heightened consumer contentment (Bessant & Caffyn, 1997; Brunet & New, 2003). Brunet and New (2003) conclude that kaizen evolved uniquely in organizations, following positive changes in the business environment. Kaizen is also linked to the development of a culture that promotes ongoing learning and flexibility, which is essential in the fast-paced corporate climate of today (Bhuiyan & Baghel, 2005). Although kaizen is widely used in manufacturing, its ideas are also being applied in various other industries, such as services, healthcare, and retail (Chen & Thota, 2012). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of kaizen initiatives can greatly differ based on the level of dedication the organization has towards the process and the extent to which employees are authorized to participate in ongoing improvement endeavours (Singh & Singh, 2015).

Kaizen is more than a tool (Von Thiele Schwarz et al., 2017); it is a philosophy and a way of life. It has become a household concept in lean manufacturing and an integral part of lean project management. Kaizen is a century-old Japanese concept translated as "change for the better" in English but commonly conceptualized as continuous change or improvement (Singh & Singh, 2009).

This study aims to determine whether the experience of project management in the development departments at LS Retail reflects the implementation of kaizen. Furthermore, the study aims to determine whether the employees' experiences reflect a kaizen culture in the development departments. The following questions are posited to fulfil the aims of the study: *RQ1: Does the employees' experience of project management in the development departments at LS Retail reflect the implementation of kaizen? RQ2: Has kaizen culture manifested itself in the development departments? RQ3: Has the agile tradition helped the introduction of kaizen culture in the development departments at LS Retail?*

The article examines the incorporation of kaizen, a concept focused on continuous improvement, into project management within LS Retail's development departments. Using qualitative interviews, this study investigates if kaizen has transformed into a cultural phenomenon within these teams. The results suggest an increasing implementation of kaizen, facilitated by the company's agile structure, while difficulties remain in areas such as communication and training. The study provides valuable information for other firms seeking to successfully apply kaizen.

The research paper is structured as follows. The subsequent part examines the fundamental ideas of agile and kaizen, emphasizing their significance and incorporation. Section three provides a comprehensive explanation of the research methodology, specifically focusing on the qualitative approach employed. Section four provides an exposition of the results obtained from the examination of the data. Section five encompasses the discussion and interpretation of the results, and section six provides the last remarks, presenting a concise overview of the key discoveries, contributions, limits, and recommendations for future studies.

Principles of Agile and Kaizen

Agile has become the foundation for the Scrum methodology and is an iterative and flexible approach to project management and software development that emphasizes collaboration, customer feedback, and continuous improvement. It originated in the software development industry as a response to the limitations of traditional, sequential project management methods. The Agile Manifesto consists of four key values: Individuals and interactions over processes and tools, working software over comprehensive documentation, customer collaboration over contract negotiation, and, lastly, responding to change over following a plan (Beck et al., 2001; Möller, 2014).

Agile methodologies include Scrum, kanban, Extreme Programming, and Lean Software Development, each with its own practices and frameworks for implementing agile principles. Overall, agile methodologies prioritize delivering value to customers quickly and efficiently, fostering collaboration and adaptability, and promoting a culture of continuous improvement (Cobb, 2023).

The process underlying kaizen is both top down and bottom up. At the top, it begins with an identification of the target condition and then asks what the goal is, what the current state is, and why there is a gap between the two. The gap between the current state and the ideal state reflects the general truism of life itself – there is always room for improvement. From the bottom, the process begins with identifying the existing problem (the deviation from the standard) and asking what the goal is, what the current state is, and why there is a gap between these two (Miller et al., 2014). The concept of improvement is subdivided into two terms: innovation and kaizen. Innovation is characterized by a major improvement, where drastic measures are taken and significant investments of resources are devoted to the procurement of innovative technology and equipment. A drastic transformation is rare; it involves the innovation of the process rather than the final product. Kaizen, however, refers to small, continuous improvements, where the emphasis is on how the processes can be improved. Human effort plays a central role in processes, and it has the greatest impact on finding ways to enhance beyond the standard (Miller et al., 2014).

Despite being a process-oriented, problem-solving methodology, the processes that kaizen is built upon exist to support employees in their work. This is analogous to machines, which are there to make the employee's task easier, safer, and faster (Ōno, 1988). Kaizen emphasizes human attributes such as morality, communication, training, teamwork, involvement, self-discipline, and common sense (Imai, 2012). It is centred around people because they are integral to the process and, ultimately, to the success of any organization (Imai, 1986). Moreover, Kaizen focuses on people because they are always the starting point in any manufacturing or product development process. Therefore, it is crucial to develop the skills of individuals operating at the initial stages of any manufacturing process where Kaizen can be applied (Ōno, 1988).

When certain behaviours and thought patterns are required, they often create a cultural atmosphere. Implementing something as a culture in an organization where individuals from all levels of society and with diverse backgrounds are interacting is easier said than done. The first step is assessing the existing cultural environment before implementing any changes or new practices. Only after this analysis can a plan be developed and the kaizen culture put into practice (McLoughlin & Miura, 2018; Miller et al., 2014). Kaizen culture is highly adaptive to changes in the business environment and enables organizations to sustain continuous improvements (De Sousa et al., 2020). Steps can be taken to define the nature of the organization and its culture. Culture can act as either a catalyst or an impediment; it serves as a catalyst when a strong

purpose is established that promotes values such as quality, improvement, and excellence. However, kaizen challenges the status quo by demanding change that may conflict with the current culture (Medinilla, 2014).

Von Thiele Schwarz et al. (2017) argue that Kaizen is implemented not as a tool but as a culture that is lived throughout the company. Each organization has its own unique cultural environment and specific needs. Overall, kaizen may directly improve employee wellbeing and have an indirect effect by integrating psychosocial risk management and interventions that change how work is organized, designed, and managed (Holden, 2011; Sainfort et al., 2001). Ikuma et al. (2011) found that combining safety management with kaizen led to fewer hazards, improved safety, and increased productivity. Thus, kaizen is not a one-size-fits-all method. For it to be successful, it must be tailored to fit the organizational culture of each company. However, there are certain parameters that must be fulfilled for its implementation to be successful (Chung, 2018). For the implementation of kaizen (or any methodology), it is important not to overestimate or attempt to accomplish everything at once. Implementing new ways of conducting work or new ways of thinking about work takes time and diligence and should be planned carefully and accomplished incrementally (Tozawa & Bodek, 2010). Furthermore, there is no single correct way to affect all implementations; instead, they should be tailored to fit each case (Graban, 2016).

Implementing a culture such as kaizen requires intervention into the very fabric of the current organizational culture, including how things are done and how employees approach their daily work. For successful implementation of kaizen, teamwork is essential (Chiarini et al., 2018). As kaizen is both a top-down and bottom-up philosophy, the organization must work as one unit to set the continuous improvement in motion (McLoughlin & Miura, 2018; Miller et al., 2014).

The obstacles associated with kaizen, the idea of perpetual enhancement, mostly concentrate on the complexities of integrating its methodologies into an organization's culture and operations. The key challenges are as follows:

1. Cultural resistance: Resistance arises when firms with personnel accustomed to established routines encounter the need for a mental shift towards continual improvement, as kaizen demands. Resistance to change is prevalent, especially when the advantages of kaizen are not immediately evident (Imai, 1986; McLoughlin & Miura, 2018).
2. Lack of understanding and training: The effective execution of kaizen relies heavily on a profound grasp of its fundamental principles. If staff are not well trained, they may misunderstand kaizen principles or fail to see their importance, resulting in superficial adoption or erroneous implementation (Medinilla, 2014).
3. Inconsistent implementation: Implementing kaizen in different teams or departments can result in inconsistency. This discrepancy in the adoption of kaizen initiatives among different teams within organizations can lead to misunderstandings and diminish the overall effectiveness of these programs (Miller et al., 2014).
4. Communication barriers: Kaizen thrives through transparent communication and active participation. In businesses with inadequate communication channels, it can be challenging to ensure that all individuals are aligned with continuous improvement programs (Imai, 2012).
5. Sustaining momentum: Kaizen is not a singular endeavour but rather an ongoing and perpetual process. Sustaining the progress of kaizen programs can be difficult, especially when the initial enthusiasm diminishes or when quick outcomes are not apparent (Kotter, 2012).

6. Resource constraints: Resource constraints may arise when implementing kaizen, as kaizen often necessitates the allocation of additional resources, such as time, effort, and even financial expenditure. Organizations may encounter challenges in allocating the requisite resources, particularly when the immediate return on investment is not evident (Ōno, 1988).
7. Alignment with organizational objectives: It might be challenging to ensure that kaizen initiatives are in line with the broader objectives of the firm. If kaizen efforts are not strategically aligned with the organization's objectives, they may become fragmented or fail to contribute meaningfully to overall success (Graban, 2016).

Addressing these challenges necessitates a deliberate and sustained effort from organizational leadership to cultivate a culture that inherently values and practices continuous improvement. The obstacles associated with kaizen involves implementing comprehensive training programs to deepen employees' understanding of kaizen principles, ensuring uniform application across all teams to prevent inconsistencies, and fostering transparent communication channels to facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing. Additionally, it is critical to align kaizen initiatives with the organization's broader strategic objectives and to allocate the necessary resources to support these efforts, thereby enhancing the overall efficacy and sustainability of kaizen implementation (Ortiz, 2009).

Al Smadi (2009) emphasizes that successfully implementing the kaizen technique necessitates a shift in managerial mindsets. Managers may need to reassess their approach to interacting with employees. Jorgensen et al. (2003) highlight the significance of middle management group's self-assessment in overcoming obstacles to the adoption of continuous improvement. Similarly, a study conducted by Johnston et al. (2001) discovered that in the context of continuous improvement, not participating in establishing targets was likely to weaken the team-based empowerment philosophy of the kaizen technique. Managers should demonstrate a willingness to distribute power to subordinates, as an illustration. Members of the organization should be given the authority and opportunity to contribute to the establishment of goals for enhancing processes and generating innovative ideas for ongoing improvement. It is important to adhere to a code of ethics when making this decision (Styhre, 2001). Undoubtedly, such an approach necessitates senior executives to cultivate a culture within the company that can facilitate the execution of the kaizen plan (Al Smadi, 2009).

Research methodology

The aim of this research is to examine whether employees' experiences with project management at LS Retail reflected the implementation of kaizen and whether kaizen as a culture has manifested within the development departments.

The research examined the project management experience of the LS Retail development department personnel using kaizen, a continuous improvement concept. LS Retail is part of the Aptos group of companies and operates independently in it. Since 2021, Aptos and LS Retail have been owned by the Merchant Banking Division of Goldman Sachs, one of the largest managers of private capital globally. LS Retail has a strong tradition of agile project management and over 30 years' experience in the software industry. The implementation of kaizen into the development teams at LS Retail began in 2020 and has been evolving since then. The implementation involved establishing a kaizen Council that functions as the governing body for the kaizen process being utilized in the development department.

Given the study's focus on LS Retail, the participant pool was small, limiting the research scope. Therefore, qualitative research was chosen over quantitative methods to understand the nuances of the employees' experiences (Esterberg, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, a qualitative methodology is particularly suited for exploring complex phenomena and understanding the depth of human experiences (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative methods were selected to capture the intricacies of individual perspectives and contextual factors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, combining predetermined questions with the flexibility to explore emerging topics, allowing for deep exploration of participants' experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Participants were purposefully selected based on their roles and involvement with kaizen, ensuring they could provide rich, detailed insights (Patton, 2015). Interviews were conducted in person or via Microsoft Teams. They were recorded with consent, and detailed notes were taken to capture key points (Yin, 2009).

The data analysis process involved several steps aimed at systematically organizing, interpreting, and deriving meaning from the collected data (Miles et al., 2014). Transcriptions converted spoken words into written text, capturing every nuance (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data were coded by identifying and labelling text segments related to themes, which were grouped into broader categories reflecting the study's main themes: Kaizen implementation, project management experience, and team dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thematic analysis identified patterns, recurring themes, and experiences shared by participants to uncover commonalities and differences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes were interpreted in the context of participants' roles, LS Retail's organizational culture, and the development department to understand their significance and how they addressed the research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). A comparative analysis explored differences and similarities across teams, focusing on how kaizen implementation and project management experiences varied and what factors influenced these variations (Yin, 2009). The final analysis synthesized themes into a narrative that addressed the research questions, interpreting findings within existing literature to provide insights into kaizen, project management, and organizational culture (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

To ensure validity and reliability, the researchers engaged in reflexivity, mindful of biases that could influence the analysis. Member checking was employed, allowing participants to review and provide feedback on the findings, ensuring accurate representation of their views (Miles et al., 2014).

The sample comprised 12 individuals employed at LS Retail's development departments. Participants were chosen using purposeful sampling based on their in-depth knowledge of specific areas, selected from three teams based on how they had incorporated kaizen into their project management. One team fully embraced kaizen, another was adapting to it, and a third was beginning to implement kaizen principles. Individuals were chosen based on their roles: product director, product owner, lead developer, and quality assurance tester. Pseudonyms (P1 to P12) were assigned to conceal identities. Interviews, consisting of 28 questions, averaged 57 minutes and 17 seconds. Three main themes and three subthemes emerged during the analysis: *i) kaizen and continuous improvement*, *ii) project management*, and *iii) organizational culture*, where the three subthemes are *flow of information*, *shared commitment and purpose*, and *departmental alignment*. The themes provided various insights into project management and revealed how Kaizen has been implemented differently across the department and within each team.

Table 1
Research Participants

Interviewee/Person	Team	Job position	Gender
P1	2	Product Owner	Male
P2	1	Product Owner	Female
P3	3	Product Owner	Female
P4	1	Senior Developer	Male
P5	3	Solution lead	Female
P6	3	Product Director	Male
P7	2	Senior Developer	Male
P8	2	Tester Q/A - Lead	Female
P9	1	Product Director	Male
P10	3	Tester Q/A	Female
P11	2	Tester Q/A	Male
P12	2	Product Director	Male

Source: Authors' work

Results

This chapter explores the findings from the analysis of the interviews taken with the development departments employees at LS Retail to gain insight into the project management experience and to understand the manifestation of kaizen within that department. In the subsection, an analysis is conducted on the themes. The first theme, *kaizen and continuous improvement*, aims to describe the nature of kaizen and the idea of continuous improvement in the development departments and to illustrate how deeply the culture has manifested itself in LS Retail. The second theme, *project management*, describes the employees' experience with project management at LS Retail and the potential influence of kaizen's implementation. The third theme is *organizational culture*. The three subthemes are *flow of information*, *shared commitment and purpose*, and *departmental alignment*. These themes describe the experiences the employees have had regarding the flow of information across LS Retail and within the teams and their perceptions of organizational alignment in relation to kaizen.

Kaizen and Continuous Improvement

The manifestation of Kaizen is explored through the employees' experiences with project management in the development departments. Although there is an underlying culture in LS Retail that supports kaizen, as a culture or a methodology it is still in its developmental stages. In all the interviews, it was apparent that the employees were aware that kaizen is used in some fashion in the organization. As P6 from Team 3 said, *"Each team has a representative in the [Kaizen] Council so, in effect, we are constantly working on improvements."* The interviewees had been introduced to kaizen on various levels, and kaizen was being used to varying extents within the teams. Team 1 had a clear knowledge and understanding of kaizen, and all of them described the use of kaizen in a straightforward manner, sharing how they had integrated it into their project management structure and as a methodology for everyday work. P4 from Team 1 said that the implementation of kaizen was *"not only on the team level but [also] on the company level"*. P4 stated that they are a member of the Kaizen Council and further described how kaizen was used on the team level:

"Every sprint, we also have this retrospective meeting where we look back on our previous sprint to see ... what we have done wrong and what we can improve. We would list it out, and sometimes we even put it in our team's Wikipedia, where we can always refer to it when someone needs a

reminder on what needs to be corrected or some standard we need to follow."

P2 from Team 1 similarly described the process and objective of kaizen. P9 from Team 1 elaborated on how kaizen had been integrated in the team for over a year:

"We try to plant this idea in the teams so that kaizen is something we should do day over day and think about how to improve... kaizen has become more of a weekly, biweekly routine at the end of the sprint retrospective meetings, where the teams review what went well and what went wrong, and then they try to implement kaizen as a methodology to think about what we can do better in the next sprint or in the future, so it is not as continuous as it should be. This is something you should do every day, but this is how I would say this is lived in my teams."

Others' experiences with kaizen as a methodology differed from the experiences of Team 1. Individuals from teams 2 and 3 viewed it more as an underlying culture of continuous improvement; as P12 from Team 2 said, *"It is a part of our culture."* It was not a matter of *"just do it"* but a calculated discussion of how the problem should be addressed. To P12, *"this is just part of our DNA"*; P12 continued: *"This is just like you measure twice and cut once; this is a question of how we are going to do this better and keep on doing the same mistake again and again."* P1 from Team 2 stated that it is important to implement continuous improvement not only at the team level but in general in the organization:

"I believe that there is always room for improvement; perhaps we are in a process right now with a certain premise, but I think that it would be possible to look at things from a greater perspective and make general and specific improvements. Sometimes I think we are just doing things because they have always been done this way—not that it is bad, not just work-related within the teams, but in general."

Participants from Team 2 agreed that continuous improvement was not exclusive to teamwork or the individual level. P7 from Team 2 stated, *"It is always important to reflect and re-adjust, whether it being on the management level or individually or as a culture."* P7 saw the similarity between the philosophy of kaizen and the Scrum methodology: *"This is really just part of the Scrum methodology that we work after; this is something we do in the retro meeting at the end of each sprint."* P11 from Team 2 stressed the importance of undergoing continuous improvement in small, incremental steps because it is *"easier"* and because *"changing everything at once is risky and hard to go back if it does not work"*. P8 from Team 2 shared the same perspective as P11 but was more cautious on the nature of continuous improvement: *"It is unnecessary to be in continuous improvements; I mean even small, incremental improvements can make a significant difference."* P8 felt that small changes often made the biggest improvements: *"Sometimes you can improve on small things that will help a lot; however, nobody will notice it."* P8 also noted that changes can be difficult and that revolutionizing systems is risky:

"Changes must be made in correspondence with the group where you are introducing the changes; some changes are good to push people, but when you have been on the job market for 20-odd years, then you don't have to be turning everything upside down just to increase productivity, even though the objective is to increase productivity."

Participants from Team 2 found that from their first experience with the kaizen philosophy, the processes were becoming smoother, and their stories were not stagnating in the backlog as often as before. When asked what the meaning of a story was, the general explanation from the interviewees was that a story was a term

used to describe a small piece of desired functionality. P8 concluded that the stories that stagnate are usually *"clean-up stories"*. When there is a cleanup within the system, the clean-up stories tend to accumulate. Regarding stories that are taken into the sprint cycles, P8 said they *"are more or less moving smoother through the process"*. P6 from Team 3 admitted that he had not read much about kaizen and only generally understood the philosophy of always wanting to improve oneself. Even before he heard the word *"kaizen"*, it had characterized his policy of always learning something new. His understanding of kaizen was as follows: *"We are always learning something new from other people, and people need to bring together currents and policies and try to create something that will hopefully be better; that is my understanding of kaizen."* When the discussion shifted to standardization, P6's perspective characterized kaizen as a tool of standardization through the Kaizen Council as well as an everyday philosophy within the teams:

"The Kaizen Council addresses certain technical aspects of how we do our work, how we will document the code, and so forth. The council will then share their findings with every team. Each team has a representative on the council, so in effect, we are consistently working on improvements."

P4 had the same understanding as P6 regarding where the standards are set and what the purpose was:

"The standards that we are implementing are usually discussed in these Kaizen Council meetings, and... it is also something we started to implement to have coding guidelines for all our developers. But this is decided at the higher level of the company, where we have the seniors to decide".

Along with the Kaizen Council, a set of standards exist regarding the release of software and the *"definition of done"*. The focus is less on setting standards for how the work should be done and more on it being conducted in the spirit of scrum. As P7 noted, the standards revolve around the following: *"We have coding guidelines, how you code, how to finish the code, and how you give the variables names."* These standards that P7 illustrated are communicated to everyone, as P9 observed: *"We have a description what is expected from them, definition of done, how we use these tools, how this is written and this is communicated, and they get trained on that as well."* However, P6 admitted that standardization has been a challenge since they are moving out of a certain type of *"Wild West"* environment:

"Our standardization process is still in development and is not that strong; however, we are getting there to have greater control over the code; this is just something that takes time – the code is large, and everything would fall to pieces if we did nothing for days other than cleaning up."

P3 expressed similar thinking about standardization in the larger systems: *"In the larger systems, it is very standardized, and how you manoeuvre within that system, this is a large and complex system that needs certain standards."* P3 from Team 3 admitted a lack of deep understanding of the concept of kaizen, but they had experience with an older team in which they would select one story in the sprint retrospective as an improvement project. When P3 became a project owner, they were introduced to kaizen through product owner meetings, during which in-depth discussions about kaizen were held that were intimidating and alienated P3 from more closely investigating the subject:

"Being sent to a product owner meeting where there were discussions on kaizen and kaizen stories and kaizen this and that, I knew nothing about kaizen; for me, it was just about improvements. And I have really not spent

any time studying this anymore or thinking about it, and there was really no one who introduced me to it or told me anything more about it."

A commonality among the interviewees was the importance of empowerment when it comes to continuous improvement. P9 stated, *"What I am trying to do is to implement empowerment ... empowerment is not just a phrase – it is lived... one of LS Retail's visions is empowerment."* P12 followed the same line of thinking: *"Empowering people makes them more powerful and ambitious employees."* Both P9 and P12 viewed empowering employees as an effective way of utilizing their knowledge in the development process rather than approaching the process top down and simply feeding the team the required information. P7 said that the feeling of empowerment came especially from product owners since they are in close contact with the developers: *"I think this is a quality that has always persisted within this company."* P10 had a similar experience and concluded by saying, *"My feeling is that the conversation is always open; all ideas are well received."* Recurring comments in the interviews supported the feeling that employees need not be shy about contacting their superiors, and the impression was that everyone operated at the same level. Empowerment is also used within the teams to advance the knowledge and capabilities of individuals through learning and taking on greater responsibility, as P4 observed:

"We try to encourage the developer not to pick their favourite task but to try to follow the sequence as it is; I think it helps in exposing all the team members to all kinds of different tasks so not just one person always focusing on one area, so I think it helps generally".

It was clear among the interviewees that it is also important to give the employees the space they need to do what they can do: *"You are hiring highly educated individuals, and some of them have worked in this industry for a very long time; we can't put everyone in the same box"* (P6). P9 had a similar perspective:

"... to give our employees the possibility to do what they can do best every day, and this is my belief that it can only be accomplished if we give them what they need, give them some guidance, and provide a framework because they need rules. Everyone needs rules and boundaries, but I think that they are able to decide how they collaborate, how they build, and how they optimize their processes, of course within some guidelines to maximize what they would like to produce."

When asked how the company defines what makes a project successful, a recurring theme among the interviewees was that the quality of the product and customer satisfaction would determine whether the project was successful. No interviewee placed sole focus on the result rather than the path to the result when the interviewees were asked *"What is more important for the project, is it the result or is it the way to the result, given that the result is positive?"* Instead, they stressed that the focus was on what was being built and that quality would only come if the teams obtained what they needed. P9 stated the following:

"I strongly believe that we are only able to create a great product with development teams that get everything they need... The success of the company is not defined by having the best internal processes... it is, of course, connected... It is definitely what we build that matters."

Others had different views. P3 said,

"I will allow myself to say it is the path; that is what we can control; we only see the end result of what we want to see; we are testing ourselves; we are evaluating if we have done what we planned to do... but for us personally,

it is the path to the project that is more fun. We are working on this together."

Like P3, P10 said that it was difficult to separate one from the other, but P10 viewed the question in a larger context:

"The path is a very important part of the experience. To be in good communication with the customer, he must be happy all the way, so if the path is difficult, then it is not even certain that we will get to the desired outcome, and that will affect the experience, so I would almost say that the path is more important than the result."

P12 stated,

"Of course, it is always important that we get the result, but I think that it is not of the highest importance; how we do it is very important. Especially if we can learn from it and save time later on."

These statements were echoed throughout the interviews in slight variations depending on how the interviewees viewed the question, but in general, they agreed that it was nearly impossible to distinguish between whether the path forms the result or the result forms the path. P11 said that a "good path will have a higher probability to end in a good result".

Project Management

The second theme focused on project management, with interviews shifting towards project management processes and work practices. There was a commonality among the interviewees, who stated that Scrum methodology provided them with a great overview and clarity of the projects and of where they were in the process. P5 from Team 3 shared the following:

"The structure is good: the daily meetings and the discussion inside the team and outwards – this helps us know where we stand and how things are developing; you will get an idea of what is going on and how you feel during the project."

P5 acknowledged that they were using Scrum but said it was more in a "liberal sense of the word 'scrum'"; this is a similar sentiment as from P11 from Team 2, who shared the following: *"It is a very vanilla version of Scrum."* The structure of the work was organized around two weeks and soon three weeks for Team 3. Initially, Scrum was "hardcore and by the book". P5 felt that it created more problems because the employee could not show anything until the end of the sprint, and *"this could cause issues if you were already too far in the process, so it would be difficult to pivot if there were any defects"*. P5 continued and stated that it looked more like kanban than Scrum but that the issue at that point was not the functionality of Scrum but the shortage of staff.

P10 recognized this liberal approach to Scrum, acknowledging that if big companies adopt a standardized and hierarchical approach, it could be better so that everyone is in sync, while also noting that *"it is also good because we have different teams, different assignments, and very different projects, different people, so getting the freedom to adjust the systems to our need but not to just ourselves to the need of the system is a quality"*. Along similar lines, P6 from Team 3 said that *"yes, the company is an agile company that uses Scrum methodology, but if you would compare it to the standards of the Scrum methodology, it would be quite different"*. P1 from Team 2 noted that one of the more important roles in the Scrum methodology was missing:

"We don't even have Scrum Masters; they were all laid off, and if you look at the fundamentals of the Scrum methodology, this plays a very important

role... But this role has been taken over by the product owners and the teams; now it might be challenging for me to determine if it has worked well or not; perhaps someone on the outside is in a better position to assess that."

P1 further acknowledged that Team 2's use of Scrum deviated from how Scrum was intended to be used. However, the Scrum events are thorough: *"All sprints begin on a planning meeting, then we have our daily meetings, reviews and retrospectives."* Sprints are typically organized around two-week blocks. Of the Scrum events, P1 reported that sprint retrospectives were a useful and important event in the process, *"but it is highly important to have it well-structured for the event to be effective"*. This need became clear after the team started using Azure Dev Ops, a software that helps the team manage sprint retrospectives. For Team 3, the product owner was also functioning as a *"quasi Scrum Master"*. P3 noted that it was the overall project management that was the responsibility of the product owner: *"Taking on both roles becomes a blend of project management and development work."* Asked whether the team only planned to work with Scrum, P3 said,

"Well, it becomes a bit of a mix-up between Scrum and kanban; it just depends on what you are doing. You are just doing what needs to be done at any given time. We set up the sprint, and, in the end, we have a review. We try to finish what is in the sprint, but it usually never works out because we are always pulling in new or important fixes, and sometimes, in return, we pull out tasks but not always, so it evolves to be a very elastic concept."

Team 1 stood firmly behind their conviction that they used the Scrum methodology described in the book. P9 insisted that, *"I am a big fan of Scrum... we use Scrum according to the book I would say."* Unlike other teams, Team 1 still had a dedicated Scrum Master, and the roles of the product director and product owner were more formalized and standardized. One of the roles of the Scrum Master during the onboarding phase of new employees was to educate them on the Scrum principles:

"Scrum Master explains all the routines that we have and also why we are doing them, so I think we make sure that this is understood, that this is not just an event where you vent what you dislike but that there is much more of a purpose behind that."

When asked about his experience with sprint retrospectives, P9 replied that he was not part of that process: *"It showed that the team feel more comfortable speaking out freely if the product director is not present."* A similar sentiment came from P12 from Team 2, who said he was not a participant in that process: *"This is the domain of the product owners."* Other team members from Team 1 were asked about their experience of sprint retrospectives; for P2, the experience was quite good overall *"because it is not really a kind of formal meeting where it is more like an... open chatting session where we can then discuss how things can be done better or how or what we did well."* P4 shared similar feelings as P2: *"So in general the experience is really good; we are able to just say whatever we need to in order to improve the team."* When P4 from Team 1 was asked if the purpose of sprint retrospectives had been clear and properly explained, the answer was, *"Yes, this is a definitely a yes":*

"Our Scrum Master makes sure to repeat the purpose of a retrospective in every meeting that we have, so I think even if you forget, you will get reminded every two weeks, so this is something that we are always aware of."

Most of the interviewees agreed that team members were kept aware of the purpose of the sprint retrospectives. However, when P6 from Team 3 was asked if the purpose of the sprint retrospectives was clear and had been explained to the team, he replied, *"No, it has not been done, and we have not managed to get good success with sprint*

retros." P6 was not sure why this was the case but had the feeling that it was just a routine that people had no interest in and was one of the meetings that people would prefer to miss. This sentiment was shared by other Team 3 members, who agreed that while clarifying the purpose of sprint retrospectives has not been done specifically, given the experience with the industry, the understanding of the process is well known. P6 continued: *"And if there have been any issues and dissatisfactions, we have managed to solve them without the formalities; this is just a process that I have really never managed to familiarize myself with."* The general feeling not only about the sprint retrospectives but also about the sprint planning and all the events was that people tended not to be interested in the process and simply wished to return to work:

"When you are not working on the things that are being discussed or you don't have the particular knowledge in the area that is being discussed, people tend to zone out. It is just difficult to say now that you need to observe and participate."

Despite P6's experience with the sprint retrospective and his observations, he noted that *"these processes are used, and we have used them, and even if I speak like this, it is not like everything about this process is awful"*. According to P6, the processes had simply not been systematic and focused. This perspective among other teams and team members in Team 3, being able to listen to others, often helped. P5 stated the following: *"Usually I don't have much to say, but it is good for the overall view of the project."* P3 continued: *"What is often missing is the insight and will to talk about things or just to realize what can be done better."* The general trend for the teams was that the experiences and perspectives regarding both Scrum as a methodology and individual Scrum events were highly individualized. All interviewers described Scrum (as it is used in LS Retail) as a flexible method that could be adjusted to achieve the desired outcome and to organize the work effectively. P10 stated that one of the qualities of the methods used in LS Retail was *"this agile thinking constantly re-evaluating what we are doing on a day-to-day basis"*. P7 said that *"what is very good is the predictability that allows you to see the work ahead"*. Most of the interviewees described satisfaction regarding larger sprint retrospectives at the end of larger projects rather than shorter projects. When asked if it would be better to have *"larger and deeper"* sprint retrospectives at the end of bigger projects, P10 replied as follows: *"Yes, I think that would be more beneficial, and the practical lesson would be greater, especially for the bigger ones; this has been done only for testers, and I really liked that."* P7 from Team 2 shared a similar perspective. Sprint retrospectives are a great tool if you have anything to add; P7 said that *"if the sprint is done every two weeks, finding something every two weeks is maybe just unrealistic to work on."* For P7, the sprint retrospectives are an effective tool when there is something to discuss and reflect on. P7 clarified the following:

"The sprint retrospectives is the only thing we have... To this day, this has turned out really well, and it is necessary to have it in the sprint even if there is not so much to talk about and people think that it cannot be removed from the sprint; it gives ownership of the projects, finalizes the sprint, and sets the table for the next round."

Team members from both teams 2 and 3 discussed the relief when the Scrum Masters were removed from the process. Most of the dissatisfaction surrounding the Scrum Masters revolved around sprint retrospectives and the *"flood of meetings"*. Some participants felt that some Scrum Masters were trying to find issues just for the sake of finding issues and for the sprint retrospective to retain its value. For example, P7 said,

"[A] few years ago we had Scrum Masters, and the feeling was that the Scrum Masters were trying to justify their existence with needless meetings,

so they lost themselves in driving the Scrum methodology by the book, so the meetings revolved around fulfilling some Scrum methodology and to have meetings just to have meetings because it says so in some catalogue; there was really no output, so at that time I really felt that I was drowning in meetings just in the name of Scrum and not for the sake of the project; fortunately, that is over now."

P7 continued: *"However, Scrum Masters were present who saw that the team was functional and contributed what the team needed: 'the teams that got that support did not experience the stress.' This is really a fine line to manage to go by the book and do only what is needed to do."* P8 expressed that the current feeling is that there is a need for project managers again:

"There is just too much on the plate for the product owners in the group; the projects are also diverse within the group and outside of the group. So yeah, I could see that happening – that we would get project managers again, if the owners are interested in funding it."

Organizational Culture

The third theme is organizational culture, and the three subthemes are flow of information, shared commitment and purpose, and cross-departmental alignment. When the interviewees discussed the organizational culture at LS Retail, all of them mentioned the importance of the flow of information and remarked that a good and adequate flow of information facilitated not only shared commitment and cross-departmental alignment but also continuous improvement across all departments.

Flow of Information

In general, when asked about the status of the flow of information, the consensus was that the flow was good; the interviewees agreed that the organizational culture had a flat hierarchy that shortened the channels for information and communication. P9 said that *"LS Retail in general, I would say, has a quite flat hierarchy, and communication is really important for us."* P12 from Team 2 said that the *"flow of information is never too much; it could be better here"*; this opinion was supported by a statement from P5 from Team 3 that the flow of information across the teams in the development departments was good and that the channels of information were short and fast. However, P5 stated that *"when it comes to top-down flow of information, that could be better"*, and P8 from Team 2 agreed and said,

"The information is up and down; in some cases, the information is there and is accessible within the team when it relates to new projects. However, when the information needs to go between the groups, it is often something you hear from others, kind of like the word on the street."

For LS Retail, an international company with teams located around the globe, this aspect could create a challenge for the flow of information. Indeed, as P9 reflected, *"I think the biggest challenge that we have is this cross-continent collaboration"*, even though with modern technology, this challenge is always getting easier and simpler to manage. P9 continued:

"As long as you are not in a parallel setting, there can be some speed bumps there, but when you don't have this necessity for parallel action, then the flow of information channels is quite open and straightforward."

Despite the flat hierarchy, interviewees found that top-down communication was what could be improved. P1 said that *"when it comes to setting the direction, you know what path the team is going to take and how that is supposed to translate into what we are programming; I could say that this would be something that could be*

improved." The communication within the teams was generally very good, even though the teams were spread over different time zones. As P1 expressed, *"I believe that the communication within the teams is overall good and to the next supervisor... this connection to the decisions that are taken higher up and in what is being done in the development teams is missing."* P7 agreed:

"Yeah, when we had an executive director, I felt that the communication was clearer, and we had a greater sense of where the company was heading; he was keen on keeping us informed on where we were going and where we were coming from."

After the departure of the executive director, the feeling among many was that the flow of information to those on the floor was not as good as it used to be. P7 added, *"The hierarchy is not as flat as it used to be... it is as if people have distanced themselves a little bit."*

Shared Commitment and Purpose

Following the discussions about the flow of information, the interviewees felt that the executive director's departure had left a gap in the bigger picture and that the shared commitment was not as clear as it had been before. Similar to P7's feelings about the departure of the executive director, P5 said, *"He [the executive director] was more of a leader with direction and vision; this is something that is missing now."* It was as if the flow of information had lost its centre of distribution. P12 said that the idea of *"one team"* dominated within the company, and P12 added, *"Even though it had been spoiled, within the employees it still lives, and if there are any problems, people are ready to help."* P12 added the following:

"There have been difficult events that have shattered everything; this is just something that we need to work through. This is an ambitious group where everyone is ready to do their best, and in general everyone is ready to assist anyone and work as a team, so there is a strong collective identity, I believe."

This sentiment echoed in all the interviews – that it was easy to find help and support no matter where you looked. P8 said, *"Being here for a few years, you learn that some people just need more time to react to the request than others; people are just people. And the feeling is that people are working toward that same goal."* P3 said, *"When I think about it, it is complete trust among the employees; especially in my team, everyone trusts everyone for what they are doing."* P9 noted that there was a formal culture within the company but that there was also a very strong informal culture:

"This informal culture is a pro when it comes to information-sharing access, but it is also a con for new employees that don't know this informal network, and it is also difficult to get into that, right, because you are, you don't have this history. So I think both the informal and formal organizations work very well together. In some companies, one is much stronger than the other, and this creates problems. I think this is not the case here because this informal organization is here to help and support each other; it is not to take decisions outside of the formal structure, so therefore I think it is not an issue for LS Retail."

P9 highlighted that insufficient informational flow and cross-team interactions could make employees feel that they lacked a shared commitment. This was indeed an area for improvement, especially regarding cross-continental communication; LS Retail is, after all, a global company. P9 said that *"it is not like we are doing bad here"*; essentially, the challenge was that teams do not often know what other teams are doing. P9 noted that sprint reviews could solve this issue, but *"if you are busy then you*

would probably not follow what six other teams are doing, but there could be dependencies that are relevant". The central issue was how to make sure that essential information would be shared across teams without overflowing the pipeline with information.

Cross-Departmental Alignment

Some interviewees discussed the need for spreading knowledge across the department and across other departments. Senior developers felt that those who had the most experience were being interrupted by the support team. P7 expressed the following:

"It would probably be good to increase the knowledge base within the support team, that is, support our customers and partners to ease the burden on those in development. As it is according to the scrum hierarchy, the programmers should be protected from outside interruption."

Others mentioned disruption from other departments; as P5 noted, *"The issue is often that the sales team is selling something, and suddenly it shows up on our board and we are instantly told that we should stop doing what we are doing and do this."* The feeling was that the prioritization was not very transparent. P5 added the following:

"This can be very ad hoc, and sometimes I'm very dissatisfied with what is being done; assignments are set on hold, and we need to pivot to something else; it can be confusing, and the longer you are working on an assignment, the more you just want to finish it. It is this kind of management that I am unsatisfied with."

A story from P9 puts the importance of cross-departmental alignment into perspective:

"We had this project where we needed to implement quite urgent functionality for the customer who was raising alarm bells; so we needed to do that; so what we did at that time was just listen to that customer instead of following our approach."

As P9 added, *"instead of revisiting other partners and customers and asking for their opinions, we just jumped into this project in the belief that this was all correct and we were misguided by their urgency"*. The customer was happy despite later discovering (after the solution had been released and feedback came from other partners) that it was not an ideal solution. The solution was one-dimensional and tailored for one specific customer. P9 added, *"I think this is a lesson learned from that time that shortcuts and not doing kaizen and not doing retrospectives and asking the partner channel or inner circle, you will have to pay for that afterwards, and we did."*

Discussion

This research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the employees' experience of project management in the development departments at LS Retail following the introduction of kaizen. The intention was also to try to understand to what extent kaizen had manifested itself in the organizational culture of LS Retail. This chapter analyses the findings considering the theoretical framework of this research. The aim of the research is to answer the following research questions to gain a holistic understanding of the setting and experience of the employees in the development departments at LS Retail:

- Does the employees' experience of project management in the development departments at LS Retail reflect the implementation of kaizen?
- Has kaizen culture manifested itself in the development departments?
- Has the agile tradition helped the introduction of kaizen culture in the development departments at LS Retail?

The findings show that the implementation of kaizen in the LS Retail development departments has been successful and that there are strong grounds for further kaizen implementation in other departments in LS Retail (Imai, 1986; Miller et al., 2014). LS Retail benefits from a strong agile culture that clearly supports the introduction of the philosophy of kaizen. This is similar to what Medinilla states: Kaizen is at the core of agile tradition and is embodied in the Agile Manifesto (Medinilla, 2014). The results from the interviews show that there is room for further implementation of kaizen in LS Retail, which should be undertaken company-wide and not only in the development departments. Additionally, the implementation of kaizen on the team level differed among teams; while Team 1 embraced kaizen in their daily tasks, Team 3 viewed it more as a top-down tool of standardization. Understandably, teams use kaizen differently; what matters is the adaptation to the culture of kaizen (Miller et al., 2014). According to Imai (2012), kaizen is an organization-wide culture that must be embraced at every level for it to be successful.

The interviews demonstrate that kaizen has been adapted in the development departments down to the team level and that kaizen is lived throughout the entire department. Echoing Miller et al. (2014), P6, P9, and P12 stated that the idea of continuous improvement is not merely something that is discussed but rather lived and that it is part of their DNA. In interviews where Gemba kaizen was discussed, it became evident that it can serve as a powerful tool. It is a proactive approach aimed at reducing waste and improving codes, work environments, and processes. Gemba kaizen initiatives originate both from directives from the kaizen council and from within development teams (Liker & Ross, 2017; Ortiz, 2019). It was, however, not clear to what extent the tools of Gemba kaizen are used or which tools other than kanban and root cause analysis (tools such as 5S; Omogbai & Salonitis, 2017) were discussed in detail. However, some interviewees hinted that value stream mapping (Contras, 2022) was conducted at the beginning of projects. Miller et al. (2014) and McLoughlin and Miura (2018) observed that one of the most important aspects of implementing kaizen successfully is empowerment – that there is an environment that empowers and supports people in developing their skills. In the interviews, it became clear that empowerment is at the centre of LS Retail's organizational culture. There is a strong culture of cultivation and collaboration (Schneider, 2000) within and across the development teams. Employees are encouraged to accept and embrace challenging tasks to advance their knowledge and advance as employees, which is in line with Schneider's (2000) types of organizational cultures. It was also clear that the employees feel that they are trusted by their colleagues and managers; this demonstrates that the collective identity of the teams is strong, and this will accelerate further kaizen implementation on the team level (Miller et al., 2014).

Moreover, the findings emphasized the importance of disseminating knowledge among employees regarding kaizen and empowering those who do not have the knowledge to take the time to understand the urgency and value of having a common kaizen path (Miller et al., 2014). As Ōno (1988) observes, it is important for employees to understand that this is not just another process to complicate already challenging work, like the machines that are there to help people and not the other way around. Furthermore, the interviews show that the employees perceive the need to create a greater knowledge base among the support teams to ease the burden on the development teams. Their feeling was that when they were pulled out of work for occasional and sudden meetings as specialists, they would lose valuable time from the projects and thus put a strain on the sprint cycle and the development process. This finding underlines the importance of giving employees what they need to accomplish their work, be it time or other resources (Liker, 2021; Ōno, 1988). Imai (1986)

emphasizes the importance of viewing kaizen as a culture rather than as a tool that is used in a selected group or in a single department; it is a company-wide culture. Like Ōno (1988), Imai (2012) notes that processes are established to help employees and protect them from oversaturation of work; consequently, these processes eliminate waste created by ineffective processes.

When the topic was diverted to processes and methodologies that were used in the development departments, it became clear that certain elements in the Scrum methodology are unpopular. Some of the interviewees discussed their dislike of and the challenge of performing sprint retrospectives. In line with Medinilla's (2014) 10 reasons why kaizen implementation fails, there was the feeling that the actionable items that would be delivered out of the sprint retrospective meeting would not actually be acted upon. Some interviewees felt that if anything should be eliminated, it was the sprint retrospective meeting. This statement from the interviewees leads to the researchers' speculation that a lack of communication across the department could lead the employees to believe that kaizen would be just another process or tool that would be an extra burden on already demanding work – instead of relieving the burden, which Ōno (1988) argued processes should be capable of. This speculation was not the general sentiment but something that should be considered and that illustrates the importance of communication at all levels. Most of the interviewees discussed the value of sprint retrospectives in implementing continuous improvement and spoke highly of what can be learned from the previous sprint. In terms of kaizen in an agile environment, the sprint retrospectives can be an asset for the implementation of kaizen on the team level, as Medinilla (2014) suggested.

The flow of information is incredibly important to kaizen as a culture, as both Imai (2012) and Miller et al. (2014) argue. The findings in this study show that the flow of information across the department and across LS Retail could be improved. The inadequate flow of information led to the perception of a lack of shared commitment, especially in relation to the departure of the CEO, and a sense that distance between the management and the employees had increased. Some interviewees also expressed discomfort and a lack of shared commitment when sudden changes to assignments occurred from ad hoc cases that originated from other departments and when the prioritization and urgency had not been communicated to the team. Management must remain vigilant towards situations that can be harmful to processes and outcomes, as McLoughlin and Miura (2018) suggest. Medinilla (2014) outlines the catalysts for the implementation of kaizen, such as a sense of purpose, long-term vision, communication, transparency, empowerment, ownership, teamwork, self-organization, and recognition. A careful examination of these catalysts reveals that behind each one, the flow of information is at its heart. Ultimately, kaizen begins and ends with the flow of information (Imai, 2021; Medinilla, 2014; Miller et al., 2014) because kaizen is a company-wide culture; therefore, it is imperative that the flow of information proceeds unhindered. Such a flow of information gives the employees the feeling that they are on the same path and pursuing the same goals. These issues could be an alarming factor when it comes to the implementation of kaizen, as employees perceive a greater distance between management levels than before, and they think the clarity of the path is not as clearly communicated as it once was. These perceptions are reflected in Kotter's (2012) eight-step plan for change management, in which the key for employees' engagement is knowing and understanding where the path leads.

The interviews demonstrated that the teams have embraced kaizen in different ways. kaizen is a culture: it is not a model or recipe for an organization to impose on its employees. Each organization must tailor kaizen to its own environment, and the

team levels may have different needs (Liker, 2021). This is also true for the teams themselves, who must tailor kaizen to their own structure. All the teams are different, with different tasks, projects, people, and experiences. It would be naive to place all the teams in the same box and use the same recipe with a prescribed order of how to implement kaizen into their daily work. As Graban (2016) argues, there is no single correct way to implement kaizen (or any other methodology) in an organization. It is, however, important for the management to communicate the urgency, value, and meaning of using kaizen as a culture in every team, just as Kotter (2012) suggested in his eight steps for successful change management.

It is clear from the interviews that LS Retail is an organization that values people and creates an environment that empowers and supports people in developing their skills (Miller et al., 2014). The findings demonstrate a willingness among the interviewees to challenge standards. Furthermore, they show a mutual understanding among the interviewees that modifications or expected improvements are not made simply for the sake of change but that all improvements should be calculated, studied, and planned with a clear objective (Imai, 2021; McLoughlin & Miura, 2018; Miller et al., 2014). The interviewees understood and felt that they worked in an environment where stagnation was a certain path to failure. For all the interviewees, flexibility and adaptability were at the forefront of their work environment. Using the tools and methodologies that allow the team to work effectively and efficiently, rather than getting mired in a process that yields little success, was a clear priority. The principle is to have the processes in place to help employees rather than having employees helping and safeguarding the process (Ōno, 1988). This understanding is the embodiment of the philosophy of kaizen: continuous improvements are essential for the survival of any company (Imai, 1986; Martin, 2014; McLoughlin & Miura, 2018; Miller et al., 2014).

The findings also demonstrate that the LS Retail development departments are still cultivating LS Retail's kaizen culture. Understanding concepts and terminology such as kaizen, improvement, change, and continuous can have an alienating effect on employees. Implementing a new culture in a company represents a challenge on a grand scale. It requires patience and diligence but primarily understanding and trust (Kotter, 2012) before LS Retail can benefit from a strong agile culture that supports the culture of continuous improvement (Medinilla, 2014). Change in any organization is a challenge, and Kotter's (2012) eight-step model for change management emphasizes the importance of communication throughout the process and the importance of extending communication to every layer of the organization.

The interviews demonstrate that the managers are vigilant towards situations that can be harmful to both the process and the outcome. The interviews also show that management supports the employees in the organization and enables and trusts them to pursue their tasks as they see fit within given parameters. The LS Retail management actively strives to create an environment that cultivates the corporate mindset and values of the organization.

Concluding remarks

Implementing change in the corporate atmosphere is challenging, and changing how people think, work, and behave is even more challenging. Kaizen is a demanding culture that requires standardization yet has enough flexibility to adjust to changes in the company's environment. It is important that the findings illustrated in this research are not overinterpreted. The qualitative research serves the purpose of an exclusive case study; however, the findings can be converted or transferred to other companies in the software industry and serve as useful information. In doing so, caution should be

exercised since all organizations are different in nature. The findings could signal or provide insight for other companies to pursue the implementation of kaizen in their organization, or they could be an indicator of areas for improvement and illustrate the benefits of implementing kaizen.

Firstly, the findings confirm that the interviewees' experiences of project management in the development departments reflect the introduction of kaizen. A considerable amount of time, effort, and resources have been invested in the implementation of kaizen. The interviews further demonstrate that kaizen as a culture has manifested itself in the development departments and is maturing. Furthermore, the presence of a deeply rooted agile tradition has helped with introducing kaizen culture in the department. Certain areas require attention, namely the flow of information across the department and from upper management to the department. Kaizen is a company-wide culture that requires unhindered communication across the entire organization.

Secondly, it is important to use the success and lessons from implementing kaizen in the development departments and apply them to other departments. The lessons can provide valuable insight for the implementation of kaizen in departments that are in communication and cooperation with the development departments.

Thirdly, it is important to establish an educational platform in LS Retail on the importance, qualities, and urgency of implementing kaizen. This platform would help LS Retail work as a team, in which action in one department could help all departments. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that there is a gap in knowledge about kaizen at the team level in the development departments. All the interviewees agreed that it is useful to be reminded of the processes and of why (and how) those processes and methodologies are used.

To conclude, the employees' experience of project management in the development departments at LS Retail reflects the introduction of kaizen, and kaizen as a culture has manifested in that department. There was also a difference in the teams' experiences of kaizen. Team 1 had managed to embrace and implement kaizen on a deeper level than other teams, and their standardized and formalized use of Scrum as a methodology also differed. However, as emphasized by some interviewees, one form of Scrum did not necessarily fit all. Nevertheless, these observations led to the speculation that a strong agile culture within companies could accelerate the implementation of kaizen. In any operation, the flow of information is essential but even more so in a dynamic and fast-paced environment such as the software industry. Thus, it is imperative that any company or organization ensure that the flow and communication of information are clear, precise, and adequate for the team and the employees to understand and to have a sense of shared commitment and purpose.

For future studies, researchers could investigate whether other departments have been influenced by the implementation of kaizen in the development departments. For this task, larger qualitative research aimed at the whole department and departments that work in close relationship with the development departments would be preferable due to the size of the company. Future researchers could also investigate whether foundational departments (such as the development departments at LS Retail) can be a catalyst or produce a spillover effect for cultural transformation within companies and drive other departments to cultural transformation through the shared commitment that kaizen requires. One of the interviewee's statements, "Empowerment is not just a phrase; it is lived", became highly descriptive for this research and resonated throughout all the interviews.

This qualitative study has limitations due to the inherent subjectivity in the analysis and the challenges in generalizing the findings. Additionally, there is a theoretical limitation in the study's scope, as it solely investigates one multinational corporation, LS Retail, without considering other companies. To overcome these constraints and expand the relevance of the results, further studies should include additional firms in varied geographical regions.

The research questions have been answered, and those answers provide a holistic understanding of the experience of project management, as it reflects the implementation of kaizen. This research has fulfilled its objectives and provides relevant information and input for companies or organizations that wish to embrace the kaizen journey.

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