

From Slow To Flow:

How Flight Levels® Helped Axel Springer's COMPUTERBILD & AUTOBILD Become Three Times Faster as a Product Organization

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Two years ago, our digital product development at Axel Springer's media brands AUTOBILD & COMPUTERBILD was facing significant challenges. In this case study, I'll share our journey of using the Flight Levels to transform our way of working - making our product development three times faster, smoother, and far more satisfying for everyone involved.

The Challenge

Axel Springer is known for independent journalism. With popular brands such as BILD, WELT, BUSINESS INSIDER and POLITICO, we serve more than 400 million unique visitors monthly. But like many media companies, we faced a major challenge: the print market was declining rapidly, pushing our focus towards digital platforms.

Our two German magazines, AUTOBILD and COMPUTERBILD, were central to this transformation. Both magazines have strong reputations - AUTOBILD for extensive car tests, and COMPUTERBILD for one of Europe's largest electronic testing labs. But despite this expertise, we struggled with slow digital product development, bringing our features to market quickly. It took an average of nearly a year to move from initial idea to the final digital product implementation.

We were dealing with common organizational problems increased organically over decades: fragmented teams, unclear responsibilities, and inefficient coordination. Our 150 employees were spread across different departments - journalists, marketers, product developers, and tech teams - all working in their silos.

Transparency was nearly non-existent. Everyone had their own goals, which were often contradictory. Priorities shifted based on whoever shouted the loudest,

resulting in many tasks being started but very few completed. Our stakeholders, understandably, were extremely frustrated. Things simply took far too long, and technical debt piled up rapidly.

The Flight Levels Solution

We knew we needed a radical improvement. Our primary goal became clear: speed. And by this we defined the Key Performance Indicator end2end Lead Time to measure and align on. To achieve our goal, we adopted the Flight Levels model. This approach resonated deeply because it offered structured solutions without forcing us into a rigid framework.

Flight Level 1: Building Team Foundations

The first step was to strengthen our teams' basic operations. Using Kanban principles, we started by teaching teams the fundamentals of workflow management. Each team learned to identify bottlenecks, visualize their work, and improve their daily practices. This initial groundwork on Flight Level 1 helped create stability and reduced small-scale inefficiencies quickly.

Flight Level 2: Coordination and Transparency

Once the teams were working better individually, we moved to Flight Level 2 - improving cross-team coordination. We created end-to-end visual board to map the entire product development value stream. Doing this was eye-opening. Imagine giving your organization an underwater camera and finally seeing clearly what was happening beneath the surface.

We visualized each step from idea generation to implementation, revealing previously hidden bottlenecks and issues. The complexity was stunning. There were countless interactions, decision points, and unnecessa-

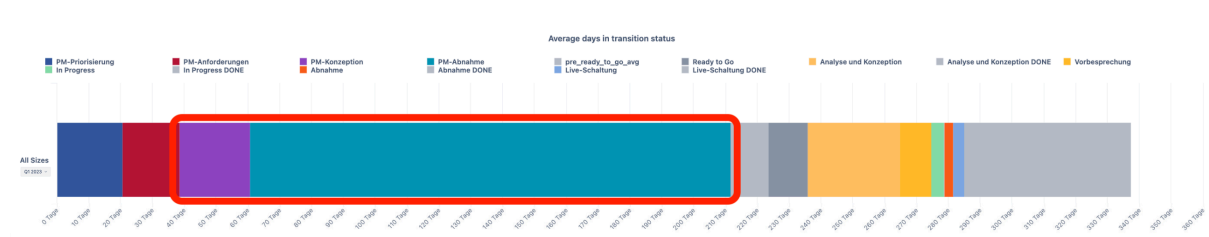


Figure 1: End-to-end lead time by working status - identify long runners



Figure 2: Impression from our Discovery Sprints

ry waiting times. A particular bottleneck stood out: the initial product and technical analysis phase. Traditionally, this had been a chaotic process, with each department pursuing its ideas independently.

To solve this, we introduced Discovery Sprints. These workshops brought all relevant stakeholders together – journalists, developers, marketers, and product managers – to collaboratively analyze problems, develop ideas, and prioritize features based on user needs and feasibility. Initially, these sprints were challenging, but soon they became crucial for early alignment.

Flight Level 3: Strategic Alignment

As our coordination improved, we naturally progressed to Flight Level 3 - focusing on strategic alignment and understanding the “why” behind our work. Management quickly noticed that teams could now handle day-to-day decisions independently, freeing them to concentrate on strategic goals.

Although defining strong strategic goals was initially challenging, even imperfect objectives provided clarity. They allowed us to make better daily decisions, aligning everyone’s efforts toward shared outcomes. It became clear that precise goal wording mattered less than having a clear direction.

Outcomes

The results were impressive. When we started measuring our end-to-end lead time in early 2023, our larger

projects took an average of 338 days - almost a full year. By early 2025, this number dropped dramatically to just 58 days, representing an 83% improvement.

Today, our product development is literally three times faster in average. Reduced lead times mean quicker feedback loops from customers, stakeholders, and the market, allowing us to adapt products swiftly and accurately. Stakeholder satisfaction skyrocketed. Our improved transparency eliminated unnecessary debates about priorities and allowed for clearer roadmaps and better-aligned goals.

Remarkably, these improvements also made our organization resilient. Recently, AUTOBILD and COMPU-TERBILD decided to restructure teams, relocating many colleagues from Hamburg to Berlin. Because our processes were robust and transparent, this organizational change occurred seamlessly without impacting product development speed or quality.

Lessons Learned

Reflecting on our journey, several key insights stand out:

- **Transparency is Essential:** Measuring and visualizing our workflow helped eliminate guesswork. Facts replaced gut feelings, enabling effective decisions.
- **Alignment Comes from Structure and Data:** Clear processes, structured meetings, and measurable KPIs aligned our diverse teams more effectively than mere motivational speeches.

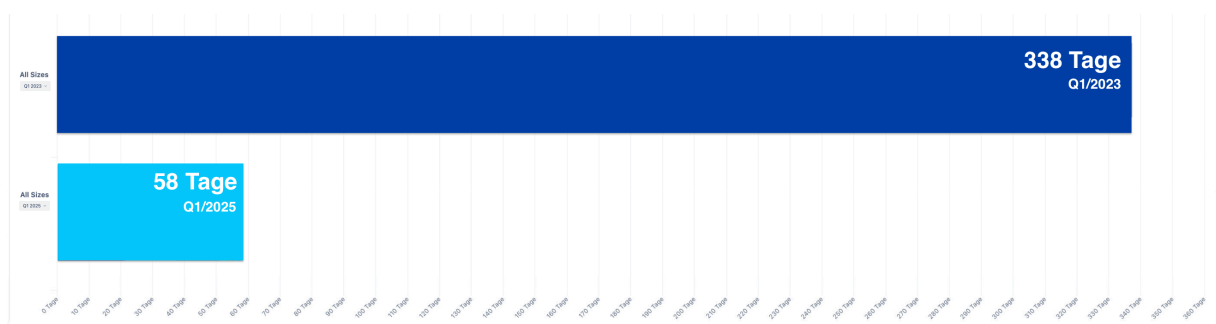


Figure 3: Excerpt from our JIRA Tool showing our strongly decreased end2end Lead Times

- **Stability Before Change:** Establishing stable, transparent processes first allowed us to handle major organizational shifts smoothly. Changing structures without clarity and stability leads to chaos, not improvement.
- **Imperfect Goals are Better Than None:** Even initially unclear or imperfect strategic goals provided essential direction and momentum. Don't overthink goal formulation; focus instead on consistent improvement.
- **Work Smarter, Not Harder:** Rather than pushing people to work faster, we succeeded by identifying and eliminating unnecessary waiting times, bottlenecks, and waste. Smarter work, not more work, boosted our efficiency.

Visualizing Success

Visual tools played a crucial role in our transformation. Our Flight Level 2 board acted as an organizational “underwater camera,” providing clarity we'd never had before. Discovery Sprints provided collaborative environments that broke down silos and sparked creative, shared solutions.

In closing, adopting Flight Levels wasn't simply about adopting new methods - it was about fundamentally rethinking collaboration, transparency, and value creation. Our journey has shown that transformation isn't linear or always comfortable, but with structured steps and clear goals, radical improvement is not only possible but inevitable.

Thanks to Flight Levels, AUTOBILD and COMPUTER-BILD has become not only a faster, smarter organization but one ready to confidently face the ongoing challenges and opportunities in our rapidly changing industry.



Stephan Obbeck, has been working in the IT industry for nearly 30 years, first as a project manager and later as an agile coach. Throughout most of his career, he operated as an external consultant, gaining deep insights into a wide range of companies and becoming familiar with a diverse spectrum of agile approaches.

As a private pilot, his passion for Flight Levels comes naturally – and he has successfully applied the concept in several real-world projects.

Since 2021, Stephan has been working as an agile coach at Axel Springer in the Tech & Product area. In 2023, he took on the additional role of team lead for the agile coaches at Axel Springer National Media & Tech GmbH.