BRIDGING SILOS USING CROSS-TEAM ROTATIONS

Making Progress on Shared Problems

HI, I AM TOBI

Personal

1. Actually I am a 👨🏻‍🌾 boy
2. Living in Vienna for 5+ years
3. Spent half my life 🏀ing too little 🎸
4. I watch cooking shows at 🌃
5. I ⚖️ coffee by the milligram

Work

1. Worked at commercetools for 8 years 🦖 - remotely 5 and onsite 3
2. Technical at ❤️‍🔥 and focusing on projects spanning across teams
3. Focus more and more on organisation wide initiatives

WHERE WE STARTED 8 YEARS AGO

Head of Engineering

Product Owner

Backend Team

Frontend Team

OPs Team

APIs, Business User Tooling, Infrastructure

LET'S TRY...
...a cross-functional team

Engineering (FE & BE)

Agile Coach

Product Owner

WHERE WE ENDED UP 2 YEARS LATER

Agile Coaches and People Coaches

Cross-Functional Team

Orders

Cross-Functional Team

Products

Cross-Functional Team

Checkout

Cross-Functional Team

Prices

OPs Teams, SDK Teams and Search Team

Silos started to form - synergies lost

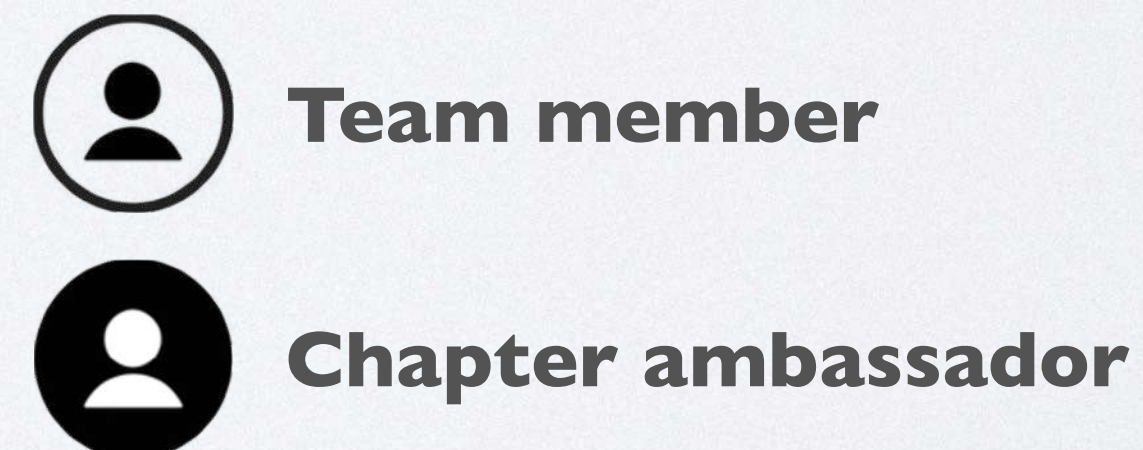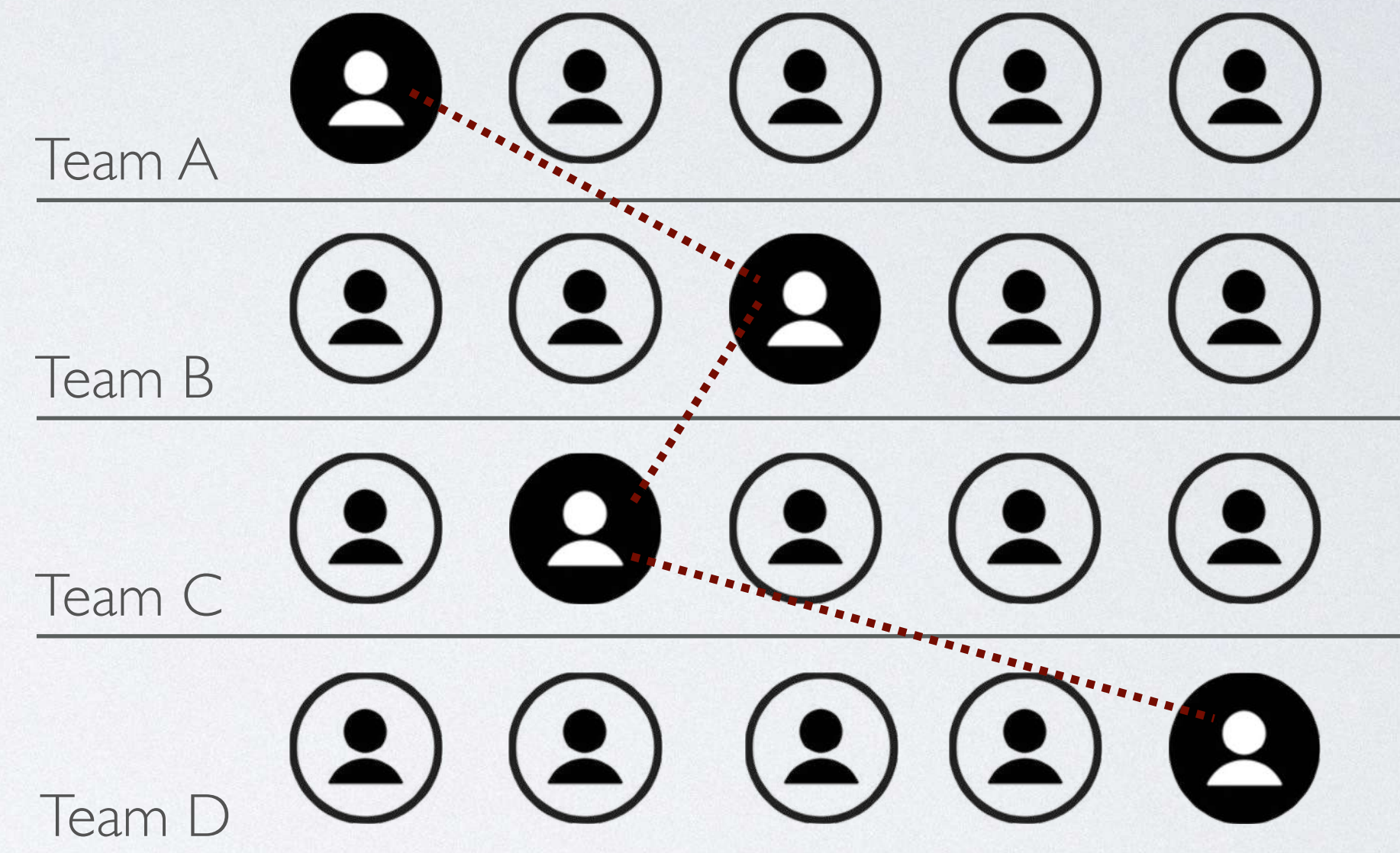…let's call it radical autonomy.

We needed to pull teams together

MORE DOMAIN TEAMS, MORE SHARED PROBLEMS

What **Chapters per function**

- Each team sends an **ambassador**

- Monthly meetings to groom **backlog**

- Quarterly **prioritisation** with teams on work items

- **Voluntary** participation on initiatives

Team A

Team B

Team C

Team D

Team member

Chapter ambassador

THREE YEARS LATER...

Our company has changed a lot since then from 4 to 13 teams

We ended up having four Engineering Chapters (Frontend, Backend, Search, SREs)

Now Chapters needed to align among each other

Voluntary contributions caused parking of impactful work

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We ended up having four Engineering Chapters

THE SYSTEM STARTED TO BREAK DOWN

Now Chapters needed to align among each other

Voluntary contributions caused parking of impactful work

HYPERBOLIC DISCOUNTING

...smaller, immediate reward over a larger, later reward

Stretch goals only
- Longer initiatives failed

Lack of predictable investments for long-term technical foundations
- Slowing teams down
- Not evenly distributed

Tragedy of the commons
- Shared libraries or abstractions being left behind

No cross-team collaboration
- People being siloed in teams
- Repeated solutions

Budget - an investment portfolio

New things, improvements, productivity and KTLO

Maintaining code health holistically

Consistently improve productivity

Required upgrades and migrations

Contribute to engineers professional growth

ORGANISATIONAL ALIGNMENT

Chapters of Chapters

A shared process of how we **define Chapters** and **how they work** and more importantly **what they work on**

MORE HOMEWORK TO START WITH

1 We ran **15+ interviews** across the organisation and roles

- Engineering, Product, and UX to align on common goals and needs

2 Transparent **process definitions for all Chapters** and stakeholders

- Easier to grasp for outsiders and integrate with as all follow one way of working

3 Rollout this out through **transparent change management**

- Slow and iterative transitions of Chapters into new model of working

POSSIBLE OPERATING MODELS

❌ **Fully rotating virtual team**

- No knowledge keeper - handover is tricky

- Nobody feels responsible for sitting in a driver's seat

- We tried this model and always struggled with it

❌ **Fixed team from existing teams**

- No dedicated head count to hire

- No team wanted to give up people

- Easier to manage and clear ownership

- No knowledge sharing - creating a bin team

✅ **Hybrid with fixed lead and rotation**

- Structure and process in static hands

- Knowledge exchange through rotation

- Steady progress and collaborative decision making

PICKING THE OPERATING MODEL

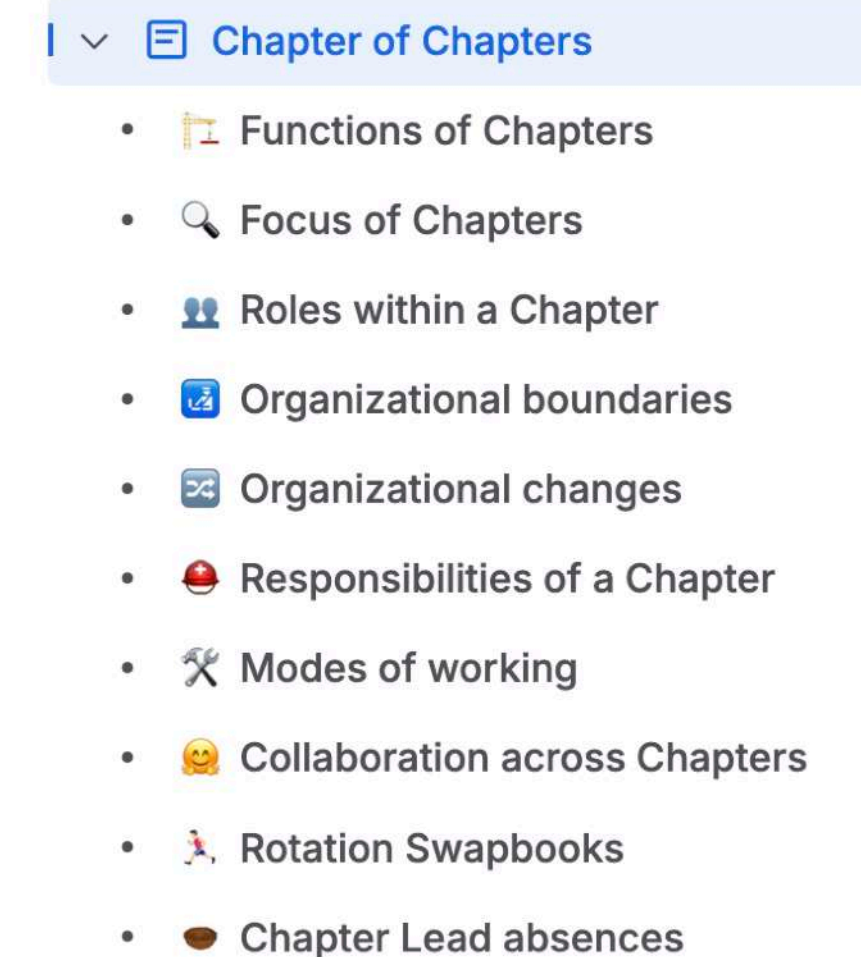1️⃣ We **staff rotations with 4-5 people for 4 weeks** at 10% of department capacity

- Announced a year in advance with interleaved slots to minimise handover in the rotation

2️⃣ Teams take **Chapter mandatory participation** into account when planning

- Announced a year in advance with interleaved slots to minimise handover in the rotation

3️⃣ Document, document and **document again**

- Define ways of working, processes, edge cases in writing
- Responsibilities, rotation swap books, Chapter Lead absences among other things

⌄ ▣ Chapter of Chapters
- 🚩 Functions of Chapters
- 🔍 Focus of Chapters
- 👥 Roles within a Chapter
- 🔲 Organizational boundaries
- 🔀 Organizational changes
- ⛔ Responsibilities of a Chapter
- 🛠 Modes of working
- 🧑‍🤝‍🧑 Collaboration across Chapters
- 🏃 Rotation Swapbooks
- ☕ Chapter Lead absences

RULES OF PLAY FOR THE ROTATION

1 Chapters maintain a **transparent and prioritised backlog**

- Teams including EMs or PMs and ambassadors can open tickets

2 **Chapter Lead facilitates prioritization** together ambassadors

- High degree of asynchronous working model in rotation

3 Decisions are **documented in RFCs** which require approvals (maybe outside)

- Integration into existing RFC review model if affects or interests wider organisation

4 **Chapter Lead** manages a **work grooming** for the rotation members

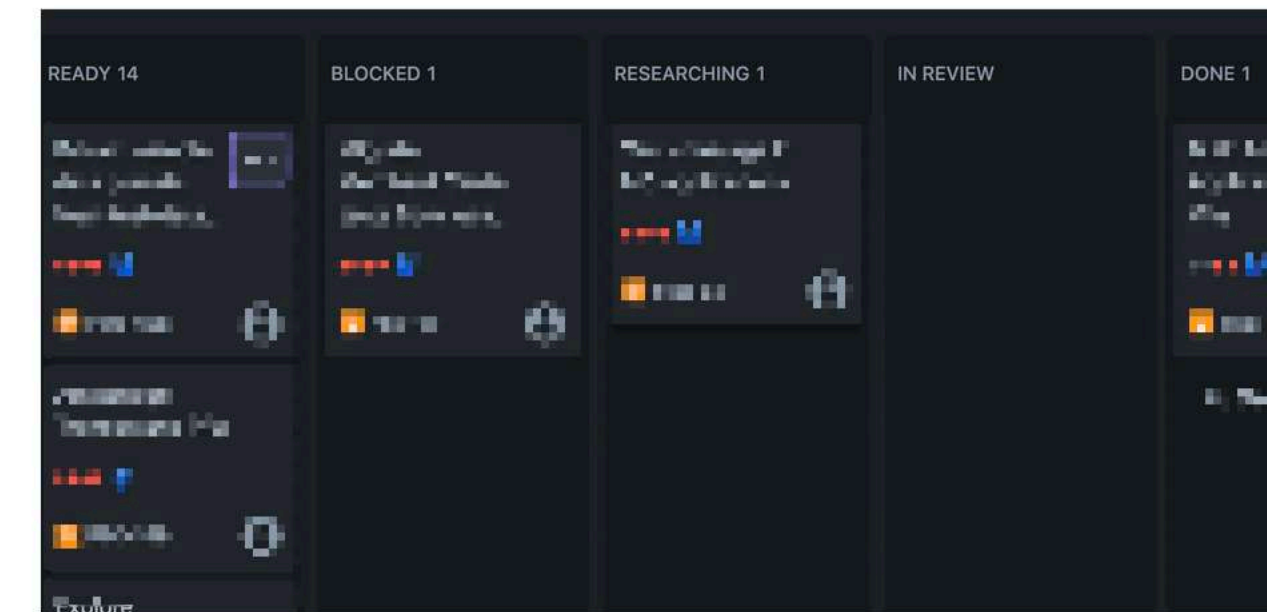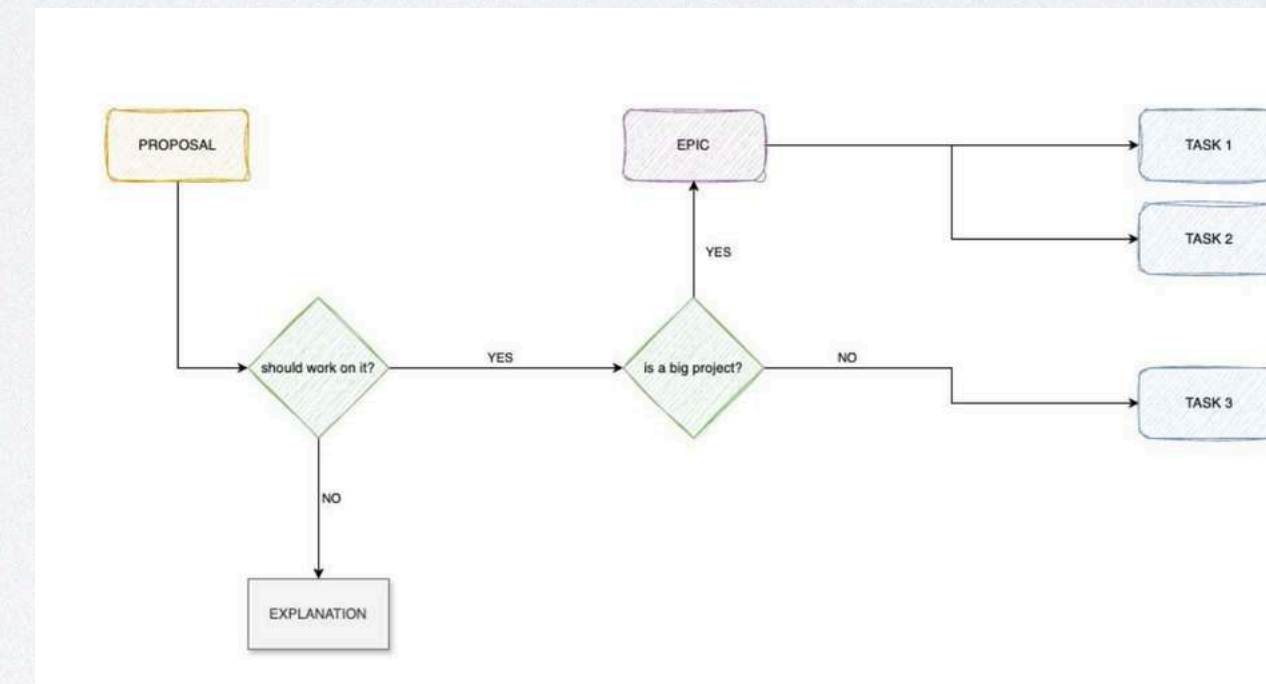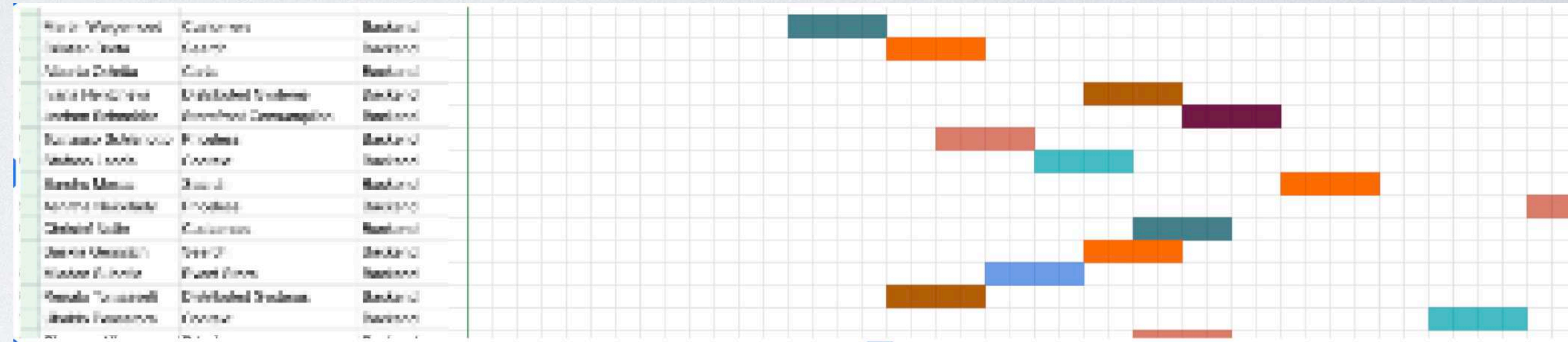- Keep the engine warm if people join and switch tasks

5 **Bi-weekly digests** and **quarterly demos** of finished work

- Prevent Chapter work to be invisible or not recognised

DEFINING ROTATIONS AND "TEAM"

- **Weighted** with 10% per team

- **Automation** creates **rotations** pending approval by HoEs

- Establish and **improve ceremonies** across rotations

- Chapters now have **yearly On-sites**

ACHIEVEMENTS AND WHAT WORKS

Long running and needed migrations can be completed

Technical enablement work has a space for experimentation

Decisions can be enforced and followed up on by Chapter Lead

Knowledge exchange across teams and silo breaking

CHALLENGES AND DOWNSIDES

Maintaining and announcing rotation is overhead

Fatiguing role of Chapter Lead with ever changing team

Heterogenous buy-in of organization with conflicting priorities

Varying skill level and involvement of rotation joiners

WOULD WE DO IT AGAIN

Yes but...

1. Chapter Lead might need to rotate too yearly
   a. Draining position to be in with rotating team
   b. New impulses by more perspectives
2. Other organisational modes might have less downsides
   1. Chapter rotation shines and knowledge sharing
   2. It solves the absence of certain team types

...the model is very liked by engineers

THANK YOU!

Would love to hear how you solve similar challenges!