# An Actionable Framework for Understanding and Improving Developer Experience

Michaela Greiler, Margaret-Anne Storey, and Abi Noda

**Abstract**—Developer experience is essential for software companies, especially as teams shift to remote and hybrid work models. Enhanced developer experience improves productivity, satisfaction, engagement and leads developers to stay longer with their company. We set out to understand what affects developer experience through semi-structured interviews with developers from the industry, which we transcribed and iteratively coded. Our findings elucidate factors that affect developer experience and characteristics that influence their respective importance to individual developers. We also identify strategies employed by individuals and teams to improve developer experience and the barriers that stand in their way. Lastly, we describe the coping mechanisms of developers when developer experience cannot be sufficiently improved. Our findings result in an actionable, conceptual framework for understanding and improving developer experience. The framework provides a go-to reference for organizations that want to enable more productive and effective work environments for their developers.

**Index Terms**—developer experience, grounded theory, development practices, satisfaction, productivity.

## 1 Introduction

Improving developer experience is a goal for many companies as it results in higher levels of productivity [1], [2], [3], [4] and improves worker retention [5]. How developers feel, think and value their work are the fundamental dimensions of their experience, and these are shaped by many factors, including their team culture, working environment and work activities.

Previous research has focused on understanding and eliciting factors that help describe or predict developer experience [1], [2], [3], [4], [6], but which factors may impact a specific developer's experience depends on their personal, team, organization and project context [3]. For example, technical debt may be a predictor of poor experience in general, but for a specific developer that expects to work with legacy code, it may not frustrate them as it might others. Furthermore, some factors may be easier to act on than others. For example, poor directional clarity in a project may be easier to act on than a codebase with poor health.

Building on previous work, we wanted to identify which factors can impact developer experience as well as why certain factors may be both important and actionable. We focused our investigation on developer experience when working as part of a team, as many of the factors that can improve or negatively impact experience are team-related factors that are actionable by not just the individual developer (e.g., how they interact with the team) but also involve strategies that can be followed by the team (e.g., improving feedback mechanisms).

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We conducted interviews with a diverse set of software developers across the software industry to identify new emergent factors or confirm which of the existing factors reported in the literature are perceived as important to them (and why) and may be actionable at the team and individual levels. Through our interviews, we also identified strategies developers use to overcome the barriers they face and their coping mechanisms when general improvement strategies do not work. Our research has produced a conceptual but actionable framework that:

- describes **developer experience** in terms of a trilogy of mind theory (feelings, perceptions, and expectations),
- outlines **factors** that impact developer experience,
- elucidates the **characteristics of factors** that make them important in terms of impacting one or more dimensions of developer experience,
- identifies **barriers** that crosscut the factors and that hinder developers to improve their developer experience, and
- documents **strategies** and **coping mechanisms** that developers use to overcome these barriers and improve one or more dimensions of their experience as a developer on a team.

We anticipate that this framework will help both researchers and practitioners focus on the factors, barriers and strategies that can lead to positive changes in developer experience.

The paper is organized as follows. In Section 2 (Background), we present our working definition of developer experience and review previous research that identified some of the many factors that can be used to describe or predict developer experiences. We present our methodology in Section 3, describing the interviews and how we analyzed our interview data. Our findings led to a conceptual actionable framework that is introduced in Section 4. The

framework is further described in Sections 5 and 6 as follows: the factors and why they are important are presented in Section 5 (Understanding Developer Experience) and the barriers, strategies and coping mechanisms that emerged are presented in Section 6 (Improving Developer Experience). We describe how the framework can be put to use by practitioners and researchers in Section 7. Finally, we detail the limitations of our research in Section 8 and conclude the paper in Section 9.

## 2 Background

Before we can understand and eventually improve developer experience, we need to define what we mean by this term, and also review what we know already about the factors that influence developer experience.

### 2.1 Defining Developer Experience

The definition we use for developer experience in this research is:

*"How developers think about, feel about, and value their work."*

Our definition is inspired by Fagerholm and Münch in [6], where they define developer experience in terms of the theory of the trilogy of mind [7] from social psychology. The three main dimensions of the mind are cognition, emotion and expectation (also referred to as conation). Consideration of these three dimensions of experience is important as "real-world problem solving operates in concert with motivational and emotional processes, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes discordantly." [8].

The cognitive dimension concerns developers' beliefs, and how they think and evaluate their development infrastructure, processes, knowledge and skills. The affective dimension of the mind describes developers' emotions and how they feel about their work. The conative dimension of experience captures developer expectations, motivations and how they see the value of their prior work behaviours (their activities, productivity and contributions). Together these dimensions interact and shape the intentions for future work behaviour and actions.

Individual personality and other traits shape the three dimensions of the mind, but the three dimensions are also shaped by external and social forces, such as the nature of the work, the work environment, and whether one is working as part of a team or collective. Factors that influence one dimension will typically also influence one or both of the other two dimensions. The theory of the trilogy of mind aligns with our view of the developer experience and also helps us understand the important factors that shape developer experience when working with others. Maylett and Wride similarly define employee experience as the experiences, perceptions and expectations of employees [9]. In the following section, we review the factors that have emerged from related work on developer experience.

### 2.2 Factors That Impact Developer Experience

Previous research has aimed to identify factors that may impact developer happiness, job satisfaction, developer productivity, and motivation—these aspects all relate to one or more dimensions of developer experience.

Graziotin et al. [10] investigated developer happiness (an affective state) through a survey and found that the top factors associated with unhappiness were in order of impact: being stuck in problem solving, feeling time pressure to complete their work, bad code quality and coding practice, under-performing colleague(s), feeling inadequate with their work, boring or repetitive tasks, unexplained broken code, bad decision-making in their team, imposed limitations due to infrastructure, and personal issues that are not related to their work. They also found that feelings of happiness correlate with perceived productivity [10]. They found that happier developers tended to perceive higher productivity and vice versa. Bellet et al. also report a strong relationship between productivity and happiness [11].

Murphy-Hill et al. investigated which factors can predict software development productivity through a study with three companies [4]). They found that being enthusiastic for one's job was the top predictor for productivity, followed by having supportive team members of their ideas, and that they have autonomy over their tools and work [4]. A literature review conducted by Wagner et al. details even more factors that have been found to associate with reported or perceived productivity.

Storey et al. researched developer satisfaction with their work building on Wright and Cropanzano's [12] definition of job satisfaction as "an internal state that is expressed by affectively and/or cognitively evaluating an experienced job with some degree of favor or disfavor". The satisfaction factors Storey et al. identified through a large survey at Microsoft include: doing impactful work, being an important contributor on their team, having a positive work and team culture, feeling productive, receiving appreciation and rewards, and experiencing a positive work-life balance. They also found a bidirectional relationship between satisfaction and developer productivity, and that there are additional factors that influence productivity: autonomy in one's work, ability to complete tasks, and the quality of the engineering system.

Motivation for work aligns most closely with the conative dimension of developer experience. Beecham et al. studied developer motivation in a systematic literature review, and identified many personal and work characteristics that moderate the influence of a large number of motivating factors (e.g., good managers, task fit, empowerment) and demotivating factors (e.g., poor managers, poor working environment, stress) [13]. Subsequent work by Sharp et al. [14] reviewed several models found in the literature and proposed a model of motivation in software engineering that includes motivators, outcomes, characteristics and context. More recently, empirical studies by França and colleagues [15] identified a variety of factors that affect motivation, such as career progression and autonomy. França et al. point out that motivation and job satisfaction are not the same thing, which aligns with the three-dimensional view of experience proposed by Fagerholm and Münch [6], with motivation more closely aligned with the conative dimension, and satisfaction with the cognitive dimension.

Previous research has collectively identified hundreds of factors, and many factors overlap, as developer satisfaction, productivity and motivation are related aspects of the trilogy of mind. Our research captures not just one or two

constructs, such as happiness, satisfaction and productivity, but helps to impact developer experience overall. Hereby, our focus is to identify which of these factors may be the most important, why they are important and which ones are actionable.

In the next section, we further synthesize the factors from the related work to build a curated list of factors we then used in interviews to prompt developers as they shared with us their insights about what influences their experiences.

## 3 METHODOLOGY

Our research methodology involved semi-structured interviews with a diverse set of developers in terms of role, industry, projects and experience. In this section, we describe how we selected interview participants, the interview questions we asked, and our approach for analyzing the results.

### 3.1 Research Questions

Congruent with our qualitative research approach, our research questions were emergent and refined as we gathered and analyzed our data. Our initial guiding research question was: what are the most important and actionable factors that affect developer experience? As we conducted our interviews, we not only uncovered factors that matter to developers, but also the characteristics of factors which determine their relative importance to developers. Additionally, respondents shared barriers impeding their ability to improve their experience, strategies they and their teams employed to successfully make improvements, and their coping mechanisms when factors negatively impacting their experience could not be improved. Our emergent research questions were as follows:

- RQ1: What **important factors** affect developer experience?
- RQ2: What **factor characteristics** determine how important a factor is to a given developer?
- RQ3: What **barriers** impede developers and their teams from improving factors that affect developer experience?
- RQ4: What **strategies** do developers and their teams employ to improve developer experience?
- RQ5: What **coping mechanisms** do developers resort to when factors that negatively impact their experience are not improved?

### 3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Through semi-structured interviews with 21 software developers, we set out to explore what factors developers perceive as affecting their developer experience and to understand how they improve these factors on their teams. Each interview took between 45 to 90 minutes. We used Zoom to record each interview and transcription software to transcribe each recording.

The interview questions were based on an interview guide which can be found at https://github.com/get-dx/dx-framework. In the first part of the interview, we provided each participant with a high-level definition of developer experience: "developer experience is the developer's perception of the work, processes, and culture that they encounter while building software on a team".[1] We then asked them which factors they perceived as affecting their experience.

In the second part of the interviews, we guided participants through a discussion on factor importance and actionability. To deepen the discussion, we showed participants a list of factors that we curated from literature. These factors served as a prompt to help deepen the discussion and encourage participants to consider factors that were not immediately top of mind. This list was assembled by consolidating factors from the literature we presented in Section 2, merging duplicate factors, and then reducing the list to factors we considered actionable for developers and their teams. We also grouped the factors into categories to present to the participants in order to reduce cognitive overload in the interviews. This list of categorized factors is available in our supplementary materials found at https://github.com/get-dx/dx-framework.

In the third part of the interview, we focused on understanding whether and how participants could influence or improve their developer experience. Based on the insights and experiences shared by each participant, we adjusted and refined our questions about importance and actionability to match the circumstances of the interviewee. This allowed us to investigate uncovered areas and continuously gather more perspectives on topics that previous participants introduced.

#### 3.2.1 Interview Participants

To select participants for this study, we used convenience sampling by reaching out to developers in our network using email or other social and communication channels. Our selection criteria was that participants had to have more than six months of professional software development experience and currently be employed as a developer or development lead. Prior to each meeting, we asked participants for their consent to be interviewed and asked for their permission to record the session. We informed participants that they could withdraw from the interview at any time and that their responses would then be deleted. Our consent form and interview instructions can be found in our supplementary materials online.

16 of the 21 participants had more than six years of professional software development experience. Five of those had 20+ years of experience. Four of the participants had between two and five years of experience. And one participant had six months experience as a professional developer. Participants worked in a variety of industries (including the medical sector, developer tooling, HR software, consulting). Participants' team sizes varied from 2 to 100 people, and their company sizes varied between 5 and 20K+ people. Table 1 shows a summary of the developers we interviewed.

#### 3.2.2 Interview Process

We conducted two pilot studies before finalizing our interview guide and conducting the final set of 21 interviews

1. Note this preliminary definition of developer experience was used to initiate the discussion in the interviews, rather than a formal definition as we provide in Section 2 to frame our research.

| No. | Company Size | Industry | Team Size | Current Role | Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | ∼2300 | Developer Tools | 7 | Lead Engineer | 22 yrs |
| P2 | ∼1500 | Payroll & Human Resources Software | 8 | Tech Lead | 6.5 yrs |
| P3 | ∼80 | Medical Sector | 5 | Tech Lead | 14 yrs |
| P4 | ∼1300 | Software | | Team Lead & Engineer | 20 yrs |
| P5 | ∼500+ | Energy | 10 | Solution Architect | 7 yrs |
| P6 | ∼300 | Software | 100 | Senior Software Developer | 20+ yrs |
| P7 | ∼80 | Health care | 15 | Fullstack Developer | 4 yrs |
| P8 | ∼20K+ | Commerce | 50 | Software Developer | 4 yrs |
| P9 | ∼5 | CRM Software | 3 | CTO/Tech Lead | 15 yrs |
| P10 | ∼1200 | Software Industry | 8 | Senior Fullstack Engineer | 8 yrs |
| P11 | ∼20 | Consulting | 20 | Software Developer 3 | 5 yrs |
| P12 | ∼180 | Video Streaming | 8 | Engineering Director | 23 yrs |
| P13 | ∼150 | Education | 35 | Team Lead & Engineer | 4.5 yrs |
| P14 | ∼180 | Video Streaming | 8 | Software Developer | 6 yrs |
| P15 | ∼50 | Legal Tech | 5 | Senior Software Engineer | 6 yrs |
| P16 | ∼20 | Software | 6 | Software Engineering Intern | 6 mths |
| P17 | ∼125 | Software Consulting | 8 | Software Developer | 2.5 yrs |
| P18 | ∼150 | Education | 2 | Junior Software Engineer | 4.5 yrs |
| P19 | ∼80 | Human Resources & Recruiting | 10 | Developer | 9 yrs |
| P20 | ∼20 | Software Communications | 4 | Staff Engineer | 16 yrs |
| P21 | ∼8 | Software | 3 | Staff Fullstack Engineer | 23 yrs |

TABLE 1
Details of Study Participants

(the pilot study data was not used in our analysis). The pilot studies encouraged us to add a definition of experience to the interview protocol, and to include a curated list of factors as a prompt to encourage more discussion (which was needed for some participants more than others). As we describe in the following section, we iteratively coded the data from the interviews and stopped conducting additional interviews once we determined that our codes and insights were fully saturated, meaning that no new insights or codes emerged from the three latest interviews.

### 3.3 Coding Process and Developer Experience

To analyze interviews, we used an open coding approach where we coded the interviews in an inductive (bottom-up) way [16]. Interviews were conducted and coded by two or more authors over several iterative cycles. Interview recordings and transcriptions were continually revisited until our findings were saturated (that is, no new codes or insights emerged). We divided the transcripts of the participants into coherent units (sentences or paragraphs) and added **preliminary codes** that represented the key characteristics that each participant talked about. We later agreed on a set of **focused codes** that captured the most frequent and relevant factors of developer experience.

We then used *axial coding* as described by Charmaz to group the codes into **categories**. This was done using visual mapping tools in several iterative cycles with discussion among the authors. As we were coding, we wrote memos for the codes and categories, and noted relationships across codes. Table 2 shows examples of the coding process for several transcripts and the resulting codes, categories and core categories (that aggregate categories in our code hierarchy).

Early in our analysis, we identified a number of emergent **core categories**: developer experience (DX) factors, importance characteristics of DX factors, barriers impeding development teams from improving their experience, strategies for improving experience, and coping mechanisms if barriers could not be removed. These five core categories are key components in the developer experience framework that emerged from our analysis (as shown in Figure 1). The framework is our main research outcome and it also helped us refine our preliminary research questions (as presented above in Section 3.1). The core categories and associated subcategories and codes will be described in more detail in the following sections.

## 4 The Developer Experience Framework

The main outcome from our research is an "Actionable Developer Experience Framework" (see Figure 1)[2]. The central concept in our framework is ***Developer Experience*** which is characterized by the trilogy of mind dimensions (expectations, perceptions and feelings). This central concept in our framework is inspired by other research (as discussed in Section 2). The other two parts of the framework (the left and right sides) emerged from our research.

On the left side of our framework, we list the two core categories that emerged from our research that relate to ***understanding developer experience***. These two categories include the factors that emerged from the first part of our interviews (the factors that developers shared were the most important to them, without any prompts) and the characteristics of these factors that determine factor importance to the participants. We describe these core categories in Section 5.

On the right side of our framework, we show the three core categories that emerged from our research that are concerned with ***improving developer experience*** and include the barriers to improving developer experience, the strategies for improving developer experience, and the coping mechanisms of developers when developer experience can not be sufficiently improved. We discuss these core categories in Section 6.

2. A larger version can be found online at: https://github.com/get-dx/dx-framework/blob/main/Actionable-DX-Framework.jpg

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Transcript Unit**: If you have to touch a certain piece of code every other week and the whole codebase around it is suboptimal and flawed, then making changes to that code is always very difficult and a little dangerous. Or if it's not tested well, or if you don't even understand the full scope, because there's so many things that are attached, then making changes, even for new features to that part of code is not a nice task, I'd say. (P3) | | | |
| **Preliminary Code:** Changes can be difficult in low-quality codebase, high risk making changes | **Focused Code:** Codebase health | **Category:** Development and Release | **Core Category:** DX Factor |
| **Transcript Unit**: "the developer tools that people use [are affecting DX]. So, I work in the.net stack mostly, and the tooling is actually great. But there is a tool called ReSharper, which is like an add-on that companies have to pay for, which makes you a lot more productive. And other types of tools. So I think tooling and the development environment itself is another big piece of it." (P22) | | | |
| **Preliminary Code:** Developer tools influence productivity | **Focused Code:** Development environment | **Category:** Development and release | **Core Category:** DX Factor |
| **Transcript Unit**: The founders of the company, when we would go to them for that criticism, or what we need - they weren't very responsive for it. They didn't care, or at least they didn't show any sort of empathy about it or any understanding of our situation. They just said keep working. And so, I think there was always effort to try to improve, but we started noticing the patterns and gave up trying. We knew that at some point it doesn't matter. We just need to do our job. And that was kind of the reason why we would just complain to each other because there was no point to reach out anymore because we tried and it didn't work. (P11) | | | |
| **Preliminary Code:** Developers stop speaking up when not heard | **Focused Code:** Stop speaking up | **Category:** - | **Core Category:** Coping Mechanism |

TABLE 2
Illustration of the coding process. More examples of the coding process can be found as part of our supplemental material.

## 5 Understanding Developer Experience

### 5.1 Factors Affecting Developer Experience (DX)

We aimed to identify what developers perceive as the most important factors that affect their experience. As described in Section 3, we iteratively coded their responses to the question "what factors affect your experience" and grouped them into categories. These categories represent themes that helped us understand a set of factors as a group. Note that the factors we share are factors that emerged from our interviews before we prompted the participants to consider other factors that we had listed from the literature. That is, some discussed other factors as being important to them but we do not include them here—although any that were discussed were raised by other participants so they show in the table. We discuss the consolidated list of factors, our focused codes for this core category, and the categories we grouped them into (through axial coding) in the following.

We note that the categories we assigned the factors are biased on our own experiences and knowledge of software development, and that other categories could also be used for describing these important factors. We do not count how many times each factor emerged as the interviews were open ended, so any counting we would do could be misleading. However, the factors that emerged were all mentioned by two or more participants. We do preserve a mapping of participants to factors in our raw data that is available online for research transparency purposes. Throughout the following, we also discuss how other researchers have similarly identified these factors impacting some aspects of developer experience.

#### 5.1.1 Development and release

The development and release category consists of factors relating to developers' codebases, as well as the tools used to write and release code.

One factor in this category, **codebase health**, refers to the quality, maintainability, and ease of working in a codebase and its impact on experience. As P6 shared: *"Part of [what affects my DX] is the codebase itself. This is a tough problem, right? Working on a legacy code base. It was poorly architected and just hard to understand. Tightly coupled. All the things that make a codebase tough to work with and tough to change. That is actually a major factor."*

The **development environment** was also a factor that impacts their experience. P1 shared: *"the very first thing that came to my mind was around, the tooling or any friction around the tooling that either makes it really painless to go from I'm working on an idea to I'm testing that idea and production, the tooling that makes it painful to go from point A to point B"*. They also added: *"[what affects DX is] how quickly I can compile my code, how fast continuous integration runs, how long it takes me to be able to deploy my change to a lab environment or production environment, how reliable my tests are [...] anything that extends the feedback loop."* This factor also includes experience with the engineering infrastructure such as the setup and configuration, as well as debugging and monitoring.

Another factor participants felt strongly about is whether or not sufficient **automated testing** is in place. P12 stated: *"insufficient test coverage, for example, which makes it incredibly hard to do any changes, and then also super complicated codebases where things are really badly designed. So, really it's about confidence in that case. Everything that builds confidence, that makes it easy to understand what's going on and to be confident that the change you're doing is the right one. That is a big thing for developer experience to me."*

Another development and release factor that emerged was **frictionless releases**. Previous researchers have also identified that the above factors relating to engineering systems (code base, tools and processes) have an impact on developer productivity and satisfaction [3], [4], [17].

#### 5.1.2 Product management

An extremely important factor for DX is having **clear goals**, **scope** and **requirements**. P4 described how extra effort is needed to clarify with others that they are doing the right tasks, and that a large task may need to be divided into manageable tasks (what Schmidt and Bannon describe as

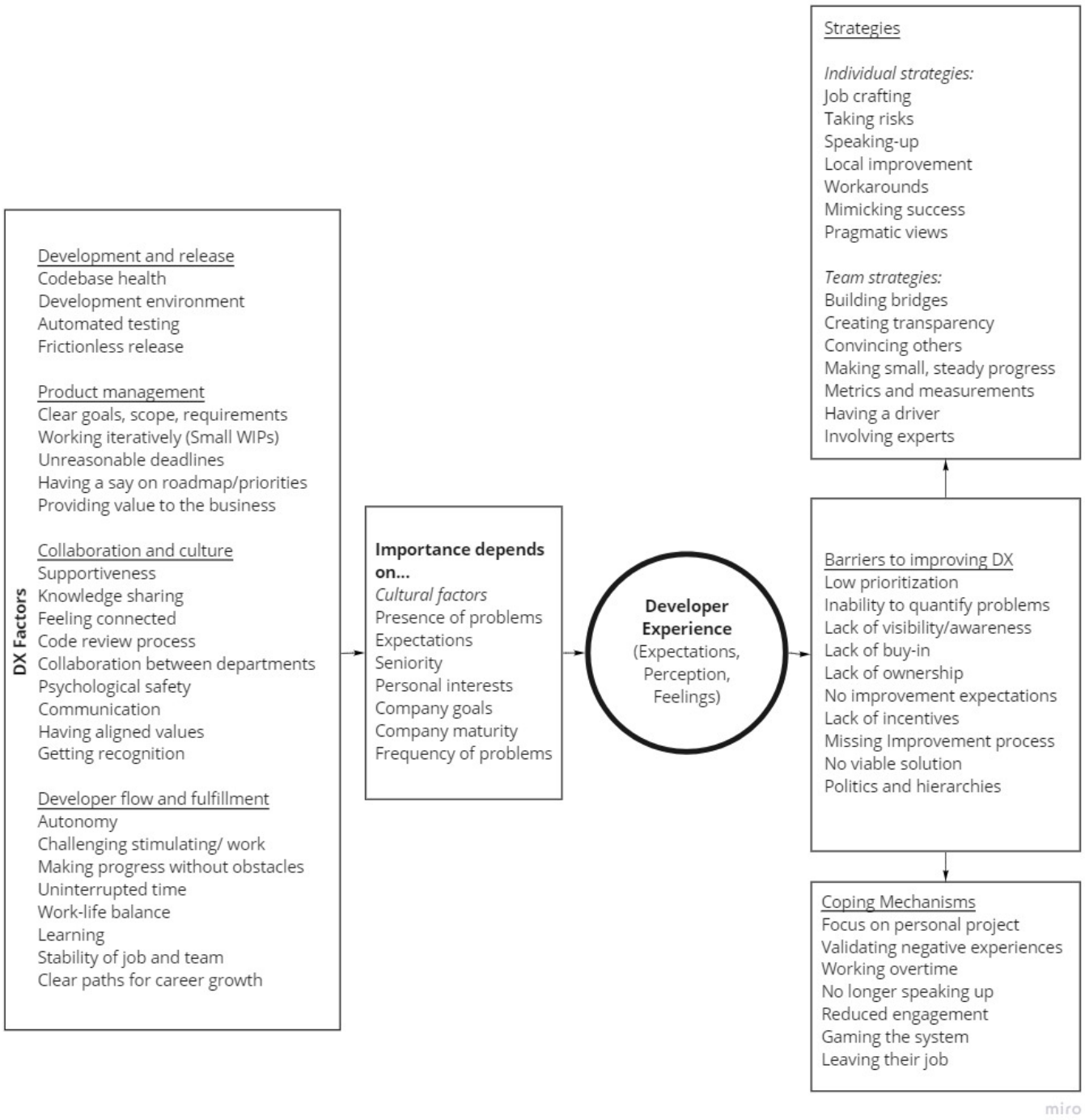


Fig. 1. Actionable Developer Experience Framework.

articulation work [18]): *"On the process side, [DX] also means that clear goals really help me. If there's lots of uncertainty around the tasks, or if it's like very large tasks that are ill-defined, then it feels a bit like walking in a swamp. It's very hard to make progress. And just the clarification work you have to do to break down tasks or to get more certainty for tasks, doesn't feel like actual work. For development teams, it doesn't feel like it, because you don't submit a PR [instead] you talk to lots of people and write a document and then you can basically create five tasks from one. And that doesn't feel like you achieved something because you're not deploying, you're not writing code."* P4 also touched on the factor of **working iteratively**, in small tasks, which many participants described as affecting their DX.

**(Unreasonable deadlines** and having to make tradeoffs in terms of timeline, roadmap and priorities was something that many participants described as very stressful, negatively impacting their experience. P13 stated: *"The goals and ambitions that the product team wants are - I understand them and I see that these projects are important, but I think that the timeframe that they want them in is not conducive to developing good software and lasting software. There's sort of a struggle."* P13 also added: *"I sort of have seen that high stress projects*

*with tight deadlines can lead to definitely degraded experience, and interpersonal interactions between engineers."* The impact of poor timelines on developer happiness was also reported by Fagerholm et al. [10]. In addition, participants talked about how **having a say on roadmap/priorities** positively increases their developer experience.

Many interview participants talked about how **providing value to the business** is very important to them. For example, P11 said: *"For me, what I find the most valuable in my work is that I'm providing value to the business. So, if I'm able to find a bug that may not be fun or interesting - as long as it unblocks the business, I feel that I've done something rewarding that day."* Previous researchers also reported that having value and doing impactful work is important to developer productivity and satisfaction [3], [4].

In contrast, many participants mentioned how unforeseen changes in the product direction leads to "thrown away" effort. As P20 explained: *"The absolute worst developer experience is when I feel like I have a very clear goal and I get done or almost done, and it's like, oh no, we have to change it completely because then you have to start from the beginning."* And P7 talked about how agile processes lead to changing requirements: *"A lot of work that I do ends up being replaced by some other work, like immediately. I mean, I see the results of my work, but maybe 30% of it goes to nothing exactly because the situation changed."*

#### 5.1.3 Collaboration and culture

The collaboration and culture category gathers factors that relate to the relationships people form and how those hinder or help them complete their work.

One frequently mentioned factor was **supportiveness**, where developers have constant support from their peers and know they can quickly get friendly help whenever they are stuck. As P17 explained: *"I would say one of the biggest ones is the amount of time that more experienced developers have to spend with you. I noticed that on days where everyone's busy [...] and people don't have time for me, my frustration level goes up exponentially. Where I'm struggling with a problem for hours that I know someone already has the answer to, but they don't have time to give me a little bit of guidance first [...] That's probably the single biggest factor to whether I have a good or bad day at work."* The impact of supportive team members on team culture and productivity has been reported in previous research, for example, Schneider et al. present how positive comments in meetings positively impacts team behaviour [19], while "supporting of new ideas" was one of the top factors for predicting productivity as reported by Murphy-Hill et al. [4].

We found that junior engineers and engineers new to a team need the support of their peers, but the more experienced engineers also talked about how **knowledge sharing** and **feeling connected** helps them. As P14 explained: *"There is this connectedness to the colleagues around you and it just helps if you have a very direct and instantaneous communication with your peers around you. Which really helps you build connections, which also helps in how you support each other in a team. And I think that's very important for a developer because I am a full stack developer, so we touch several systems with several programming languages, and I cannot be aware of every single system. So in some sense, I really rely on information from my colleagues. So if I have this spontaneous connection to my colleagues around me, it is much easier to get information and just understand and communicate what needs to happen in certain systems."* Feeling connected and the flow of information also emerged as critical factors for team productivity in a recent study of developers working from home during the pandemic [20].

An important developer-centric approach to building connectedness and support for one another that came up as a distinctive factor concerned the **code review process**. Participants shared how code reviews create a better codebase, but also help share knowledge and support and mentor each other. But code reviews can also decrease DX. For example, participants (P10, P16) talked about how 'nitpicking' or being overly critical about their changes during code reviews negatively impacted their developer experience. And P1 talked about how the feedback tone in code reviews is critical. The important role of code review in positive team culture is also discussed by Bacchelli et al. [21].

But great collaboration is not only needed within the development team. Almost all participants talked about how **collaboration between departments** is important for positive developer experience. Developers specifically called out collaborations with the product, design, or quality assurance teams.

**Psychological safety**, feeling safe and willing to speak one's mind, is an important factor affecting developer experience. Several participants talked about how an open-minded culture where junior or less experienced developers are also heard is important to them and how leadership plays an important role in ensuring psychological safety. Lenberg et al. shared how psychological safety helps predict higher self-assessed performance and job satisfaction [22], However, their research shows clarity of norms is a stronger predictor, which relates to our product management factor of having clear goals and expectations.

Other important factors are **communication** between developers and teams, which includes giving constructive feedback, **having aligned values**, as well as **getting recognition** for their work from their team and managers. These factors also emerged in other research on developer satisfaction, happiness and productivity [3], [4], [10].

#### 5.1.4 Developer flow and fulfilment

Participants talked about factors that influence the degree of ease and joy with which they can do their tasks, as well as how they perceive their future at the company. We grouped these factors into the category of developer flow and fulfillment.

One frequently mentioned factor that influences developer flow is **autonomy**, as P3 described: *"How much freedom I have in making technical decisions versus somebody telling me which approach to take for a certain problem."* But not every developer wants full autonomy. Instead, quite a few participants talked about how autonomy is needed for a good DX, but it also has to be balanced with clarity. For example, P5 explained: *"Autonomy. That's one of the things that comes to my mind, but not let's say unbounded autonomy. But kind of, know your limits in a way. Know where you can go towards and where you can't. So you know, where it's safe for you to experiment and be creative about, and so on. [...] One of my struggles today is not knowing where I cannot go to. Not knowing*

*what's off limits and that means that anything can be off limits. So you kind of feel trapped in a way."* The importance of autonomy on developer satisfaction, happiness and productivity has emerged in other research as well [2], [3], [4].

Participants also described having the right level of **challenging work**, where they are not overwhelmed by the level of difficulty but also not bored. For example, P20 explained: *"The other part of [DX] is the work that I'm doing in and of itself. Like, there is kind of like those bands: [starting with] 'this is just easy, busy work' to there's that middle ground of 'I'm learning something new, this is challenging, but I'm not in over my head', and then like kind of you've got that top level of 'here do this, and you have no idea what you're doing'. So, like having the correct, I guess, level of work."* What participants describe is what Csikszentmihalyi [23], one of the co-founders of positive psychology, describes as one of the ingredients to get into a flow-like state: a balance between challenge and skills. Flow is also seen as a key dimension for developer productivity [24].

Another set of factors in this category that relate to the joy and flow of work are **making progress without obstacles**, having enough **uninterrupted time**, **work-life balance**, and the degree to which they can **learn** on the job. And finally, participants mentioned the **stability of their job and team** and whether **paths for career growth are clear** as influencing their developer experience.

### 5.2 Factor Importance

During the second part of our interviews, we asked participants to describe why certain factors were important to them. To guide this discussion, we showed them the list of factors we derived from the literature to prompt them to consider factors that were not immediately at the top of their minds but might still be important to them.

**Culture is the most important factor.** One consistent pattern we saw is that participants described *work culture as more important* than other factors.

For example, P9 said: *"I don't think that a not perfect code base is a reason for somebody to leave the company. Let's put it that way. Whereas if you have a toxic culture in your company, that's when people think of leaving a company and actually really do it."* P12 expressed it in similar terms: *"Culture is a very big thing. I would even say that these are like baseline traits that you have to have otherwise, everything else really does not matter."*

Participants also explained the high importance of cultural factors by saying that a good work culture is crucial to enable continuous improvement of their experience with regards to all other factors. For example, if you have low psychological safety within your team, developers do not speak up about problems they experience with the quality of the code bas, and are also reluctant to proactively improve it. This in turn will lead to a further decay of the code. On the other hand, if psychological safety and culture are good, developers are more willing to tackle problems and continuously improve the developer experience.

For the other factors that were shared through our interviews, participants described importance in terms of their personal or project circumstances. In the following, we share the key insights gathered through the interviews, which are also illustrated in the framework, see Figure 1.

**Presence of problems trumps other factors.** One common theme that emerged is that developers perceive the recent *presence of problematic factors* as significantly more impactful than factors that are not impacting a positive experience. This effect is also known in research as the positive-negative asymmetry effect or as the negativity bias [25]. In a nutshell, it describes that negative events have a bigger impact on a person's experience (and memory) than positive events (even of the same type).

**Expectations shape importance**. Participants also expressed that *problems that are expected* or perceived as normal affect them less than problems where they envision their experience could be better. For example, P10 said: *"It's like so normal that the [Continuous Integration], like everything is slow, that it is no longer something that is so much discussed. Because, it also takes more time and we have a specific team that is just doing that."*

**Seniority influences importance.** Another theme mentioned by quite a few participants is that *seniority* changes how important or unimportant developers perceive certain factors. Senior engineers are described as having more mental capacity to think and care about a larger variety of factors, such as release process or team culture, while junior developers will mostly be focused on developer flow and codebase health. As P2 described: *"The weight of these categories changes drastically depending on how senior an engineer is. So if you're a junior developer, you might actually really only care about codebase health and the developer workflow."* Senior developers might also be expected to care more about and be responsible for certain factors, which makes them more important to them.

**Personal interest influences importance.** Participants also described that personal interest can make factors more or less important to them. For example, P2 stated: *"People can be so disconnected from some of these other areas of building product that it's almost like apathy. Like they don't care about the direction of the product. They just have a ticket that they need to get done and that they're not really questioning or thinking about the product direction, or how the team as a whole can continuously improve. They're just trying to get their stuff done."*

**Company goals make factors more or less important.** Which factors are perceived as important changes with the *goals of the company*. For example, when a company wants to release frequently, factors associated with deployment frequency become more important to the developers because the expectations that they will work on and improve those factors increases. Similarly, if a company cares about code quality, code quality factors are more important to developers.

**Company maturity defines what is important.** Developers also often described that the *maturity of the company* impacts factor importance. The more mature a company or team, the more developers expect certain industry standards and comfort around their development environment, such as continuous integration and deployment, or dedicated teams that handle design or testing.

**Frequent problems are more important.** Finally, many participants also saw a relationship between *frequency* and importance. The common perception is that as problems occur more frequently, their impact and therefore their importance for developer experience increases.

## 6 Improving Developer Experience

A primary goal of our study was to understand how developers and their teams (can) improve their developer experience. To investigate this, we asked developers about times where their developer experience was less than ideal, and probed about how they and their teams dealt with it. From this data, we learned about the *barriers* that developers and their teams face in improving developer experience along with the *individual and team strategies* they employ in order to make improvements. In addition, we also distilled *coping mechanisms* developers used when areas of friction in their developer experience were not improved. The presented barriers, improvement strategies and coping mechanisms are an essential part of our emergent DX framework, presented in this section.

### 6.1 Barriers to Improving DX

We asked developers what inhibited them and their teams from improving developer experience. We discovered that the barriers developers face are primarily organizational rather than technical. The list of barriers are summarized on the right-hand side of Fig. 1.

**Low prioritization.** One of the most prevalent barriers developers face is getting improvements *prioritized*. Developer experience can't be improved without committing time and resources, and organizations often prioritize other objectives over developer experience. For example, developers talked about how reducing technical debt was seen as a lower priority than shipping features: *"Although our product manager is a really kind guy and he knows that technical depth needs to improve, we sometimes fight hard to get a slot in our sprint for just improving things [because of] pressure. Pressure from the company, from investors, to our product manager, to our product itself that we just bring the correct KPIs."* (P14) Similarly, several developers talked about how running tests slowed them down, but that improving testing and testing infrastructure is not high on the priority list of their company.

**Inability to quantify problems.** Many developers mentioned that a lack of measurements or data prevented them from making a case for improvement. For example, P15 stated: *"[Improving the test infrastructure] would become a competing priority that they didn't have much measurable data. It's easy for product to say we have these customers and we can get this revenue, but it's hard to say [invest in improving testing], as there's nothing that clearly illustrates that you're losing 30 collective hours among 30 engineers a week trying to get your testing set up?"* And P10 explained: *"As long as it's not visible in the KPIs, it's not so important for the company. [...] It's hard to make a case for it."*

**Lack of visibility/awareness.** While measurements would provide hard facts to make a case for improvements, developers also struggle with a general lack of awareness and visibility within their team and with external stakeholders. Some developers shared that it was not always clear if colleagues and peers experienced similar obstacles, as P13 explained: *"I think that definitely parts of this [experience] are shared. I've talked to coworkers. There are definitely some things that they agree upon. I had a difficult time sort of gauging the extent of how my workers feel about the current situation."* P13 added that colleagues might talk in private about problems but when issues were brought up in meetings, nobody spoke up publicly about them.

**Lack of buy-in.** Many developers often talked about how missing buy-in prevented them from making improvements. Visibility and measurements are important vehicles to achieving buy-in from various stakeholders. Some developers also mentioned that management needs to trust developers. P12 explained: *"Good management obviously needs to back [up] these decisions and then support people on that [improving the codebase]."*

**Lack of ownership.** Lack of ownership over areas that cause friction can be a barrier. For example, P10 described how they experienced major problems in their release pipeline and that they had minimal capacity to improve it because either another team was responsible for it or they didn't have permission to make a change. Furthermore, ownership reduces other barriers as developers would not need to convince others of the problem and they can determine the priority of the problem themselves. Previous research also showed that clear ownership increases the willingness of employees to proactively improve their work experiences [26].

**Lack of improvement expectations.** It is not only missing ownership that hinders developers from improving their experience, others also expressed that they didn't think they were allowed to make those improvements. Lack of expectations for improvement is also an issue at the team level, as P1 told us: *"My perception of normal is that a company posts a job opening that says these are the requirements and the expectations, and then you are expected to come join that team and work the way that team works, as opposed to adding a new person, and then talking about [what can be improved]. This just feels out of the norm to me."* In general, "acceptance of the status quo" was also described as a barrier for improvement by the participants.

**Lack of incentives.** A lack of incentives and recognition can hinder improvement efforts. For example, P14 talked about the negative developer experience during code reviews, which was linked to the lack of reward or recognition P14 got for doing them. Also, P11 mentioned they put a lot of effort into improving the test suite, but the efforts were not seen as valuable as the company was expecting P11 to be a backend java developer. P11 said they felt undervalued and underappreciated and stopped doing additional work that exceeded their job description.

**Missing improvement process.** Several participants explained that there was no process for improvement, as P6 stated: *"In my last company, the process had a lot of friction and there was nobody improving it. And I was trying to get things done and talk about these things and nothing was happening. So there was no process to improve anything."*

**No viable solution.** A quite different set of barriers developers talked about has to do with the solution space. Developers explained that they and their teams sometimes struggled with unclear solutions to problems. For example, P1 shared that even though their deployment pipeline was cumbersome and causing major productivity losses, the team lacked the skills and knowledge to fix it. This presents an obstacle even in cases where teams prioritize an issue and have the ownership or authority to work on a problem.

Sometimes the large scope or complexity of a problem made it hard to improve DX. Developers talked about how problems they experienced were complex organizational (non-technical) problems that spanned multiple people, teams and departments. Another problem described by developers concerned getting different stakeholders to agree on one solution or direction, as P13 shared: *"It's difficult to get everyone to agree on one thing and probably almost never happens."*

**Politics and hierarchies.** Another barrier that hinders improvement DX is politics and organizational hierarchies. Some developers shared that being seen as a less experienced developer can drastically reduce their chance to drive change as others might dismiss the solutions or problems of junior team members. Senior developers also reported struggling with politics. For example, P5 talked about how a management change completely undermined their autonomy and authority, and that power struggles and politics hindered any improvement efforts.

When analyzing our interview data, we found that often it isn't a single barrier that hinders a team to improve. For example, a lack of ownership over an area can lead to developers not vocalizing the problem within their direct teams because the problem does not feel actionable. This in turn results in a lack of awareness for the organization as a whole, inhibiting others to make improvements. Fortunately, developers also shared with us the strategies they use to mitigate these barriers. We present these strategies next.

### 6.2 Improvement Strategies

During our interviews, we inquired about strategies developers and their teams use to improve developer experience. Developers shared both *individual strategies* and *team strategies*.

#### 6.2.1 Individual Strategies

Individual strategies focused on how they change their personal behavior, environment or activities to drive change.

**Job crafting.** One common individual strategy involves job crafting where developers actively work on customizing or changing their responsibilities or tasks in reaction to a negative developer experience. For example, a developer might see that the test suite is not sufficient and will start prioritizing writing automated tests and improving the integration of tests into release and deployment. By doing so, the developer might deviate from their original job description, as P11 described: *"I started finding ways to improve our process, or our systems and have a guard rail. I felt that brought value to the business because it would save us from rolling back on releases and reducing any issues [...] I started expanding to things that were getting out of scope."*

**Taking risks.** Quite a few developers talked about how they took risks to improve developer experience, and some mentioned how they would rather ask for "forgiveness" than permission when they wanted to drive change. As P11 stated: *"I know I had influence whenever it came to tools that we could use to help us save time and protect us from new bugs. But, it was really I asked forgiveness instead of permission, there was always that kind of situation. Like no matter what, it would never be a good idea to ask because they would just say no. So you should just do it on the time that you do have, and then be able to show them that like this could bring value, but that also requires you to spend extra time doing that work, that may not be rewarded."*

**Speaking up.** Another strategy every participant mentioned was speaking up. Participants talked about how speaking up happened during one-on-one meetings, retrospectives, or when casually talking with colleagues. When developers speak up, they either make problems visible or they speak up about improvement solutions. For example, P18 said: *"I'm just kind of pushy. I started saying: 'in the past, we haven't had X requirementsand it's led to some rocky development and frustration.' And so I'm not even going to start this ticket until I have these things that I need."*

And P7 shared: *"In the two retros before [...] everybody was supposed to put their smiley that shows their mood [...] I put it on a three and I put a really angry gorilla face and everybody else did something super casual, like six, seven, happy, smiling, neutral, smiley. But I went really hard and I made a point."*

**Local improvements.** Sometimes developers concentrate on their direct and local developer experience, and drive local improvements rather than trying to solve or improve the global experience. For example, P18 explained that the collaboration process with their design teams was not effective. They did not know how to improve the overall processes, but they proactively made arrangements with the designer they worked with: *"Of course I would like to see more global change. The entire company could have a smoother process, but I'm a junior engineer, so I don't have too much influence. But, I've just taken it upon myself. And so has this designer that's currently working with. We've just taken it upon ourselves to have a more collaborative relationship."*

**Workarounds.** A bit different than local improvements are workarounds as a strategy to increase developer experience. For example, one developer explained how working on three tickets at the same time helped them deal with slow code review turnaround times and slow test runs: *"It's a very slow test driven development. So, like running a test takes 20 to 40 seconds on the local machine. Then there is a very long review cycle, which can take up to two weeks to merge a merge request.[...] The way we deal with it is doing everything in parallel. So you work on eight things at a time because you need to switch."*(P10)

**Mimicking success.** Another way to drive change described by the participants was to mimic the success of others. Here, developers explained that they looked to others, often more senior members of the team or people that had been in the organization for a longer time, to learn how to navigate and drive change. Observing and mimicking others helped them understand how they could improve developer experience, but also identify where their autonomy ended or when driving change became too risky.

**Pragmatic views** Having pragmatic views/solutions in mind helps improve experience. Many developers talked about how their wish for a better developer experience interplayed with the goals of the organization or business. We heard about how they always balanced tradeoffs and thought about developer experience and improvement options in a sensible and realistic way that created a symbiosis between the developer and the business goals. Like P12 explained: *"And it's usually somewhere in between where you end up to be in a good spot, but it's really about having a certain*

*degree of experience how much time you can spend, how you can improve and, and what's necessary and what isn't. So sometimes it's really not so much about making it perfect, but getting it 70 to 80% there."*

#### 6.2.2 Team Strategies

Team strategies focus on influencing and driving change with the help of others within a team or organization.

**Building bridges.** Experienced participants talked about how building bridges was essential for their success in improving developer experience. For example, participants described how they actively and deliberately built relationships with teams like the product management team or the quality assurance team in order to have "allies" that closely understand the developer experience and the effects different problems or factors have on them.

**Creating transparency.** Closely related to building bridges strategy is ensuring transparency. Through transparency, developers give teams like the product team, where they need buy-in to drive changes, full visibility into the team and their problems. This in turn helps them align with and agree on actions and improvement efforts for the development team. As P12 explained: *"Everything we do and everything that we define as impacting developer experience is something that the product team also sees because all of these things are not something that happened behind a wall [...] you don't end up in a situation where you have to defend something because they don't understand what's going on or you don't have to push for something that is unrealistic because they don't understand the context, why it's unrealistic. So it's really about having a shared understanding, being able to trust each other, that when I say this is important, my product manager will say, well, then let's do it."*

**Convincing others.** When buy-in from the team or from management is needed for improvement efforts, convincing others of the seriousness of the problem, as well as the solution approach, is an important strategy to successfully drive change. Related to convincing people is also educating others about how certain factors that impact developer experience also impact product quality or development productivity.

**Making small, steady progress.** Some problems that lead to a reduced developer experience are complex or large enough that teams or developers cannot solve them easily or quickly. Developers talked about how those problems were split up into smaller, more digestible units and worked on incrementally by the team. Reducing technical debt is, for example, one of those issues that many participants described to be working on and improving continually.

**Having metrics and measurements.** A very impactful and valuable strategy helping engineering teams to drive improvement efforts is having metrics and measurements in place that quantify the problem. Metrics and measurements not only help with making problems visible, but they also help with making progress and improvement efforts tangible. As such, metrics and measurements also help to reduce the risk that improvement efforts, even if successful, are not visible, and reduce wasted energies on efforts that lead to no improvements. It also helps engineering teams evaluate and learn from their efforts, and build upon their strategies and solution approaches.

**Having a driver.** Some participants talked about how having a driver was crucial for improvement efforts to be successful. A driver, so they described, is a person that has specific skills and strengths. Drivers are highly respected within the team, and have the support of the team. In addition, drivers are well connected to others and can influence and convince people whose buy-in is needed.

**Involving experts.** Finally, participants talked about how involving experts was a strategy to drive improvement efforts. For example, when the team lacks expertise or skills in a certain area, they can bring in experts that help them tackle a certain problem. P23 talked about how they lacked knowledge around DevOps pipelines, but they brought in a DevOps engineer to streamline the process from commit to production.

### 6.3 Coping Mechanisms

During the interviews, participants talked about how they cope with a bad DX they can not sufficiently improve. The coping mechanisms we learned about range from focusing on personal projects, to regaining joy and productivity in their work, to actually leaving the job.

**Focusing on personal projects.** One coping mechanism described to improve experience is to focus on personal projects over assigned work. Through personal side projects, such as open source work, developers can compensate for missing gratification or a lack of collaboration in their paid work. As P8 described: *"During these past six months of where it's been very difficult to ship something and to feel stuck, working on this smaller scale project [outside of work] with these coworkers that I know well has been something that's really helped me to combat the imposter syndrome because, I can see that Hey, when I work with people who I know, and they don't mean, and we work on smaller tasks and things that I'm familiar with, I'm able to be productive and to ship code."*

**Validating negative experiences.** Another common coping mechanism concerns validating negative experiences. Acknowledgment of problems by peers helps people deal with bad developer experience, even if they cannot change DX for the better—just knowing that others also see and experience those problems is reassuring. As P17 shared: *"A lot of it is just affirmation that they hear you. So, when we go to a meeting, we don't necessarily agree with what's happening. When we talk about it afterwards, and it's a lot of, like, I saw that too, or I understand that. [...] It's just more acknowledging that we're seeing the same thing and that we don't agree with it, but there's not a whole lot that we can do about it."* And some developers even talk about how they "bond over bad DX".

**Working overtime.** A bad developer experience can also force developers to work overtime to try to improve their experience. For example, participants explained that they worked in parallel, did improvement work outside of normal work hours, procrastinated, or took breaks between meetings which led to activities stretching out well beyond the expected work day. As P13 shared: "I think that it can definitely lead into that making those [improvement] changes, and doing that work like outside of work hours which I suppose is, like that in itself, isn't great."

**No longer speaking up.** A commonly described coping mechanism is to stop speaking up about problems, which

is the opposite of a strategy to improve their experience! For example, P10 shared: *"But it's like so normal the CI, like everything is slow that it is no longer something that is so much discussed. Because, it also takes more time and we have a specific team that is just doing that. [The team] is also just for basically developer experience or like tooling."*

**Reducing engagement.** Several developers explained how they stopped caring. In those cases, they still performed their jobs, but only what was absolutely necessary. As P8 explained: *"The quality and overall greatness of the software we were building was declining, as we were scaling. And I started to question what was happening? Why are we prioritizing certain projects over improving quality [...] I started to lose trust in like the roadmap and how things were decided to be worked on. And I started being a little bit more vocal and outspoken about like: 'Hey, we need to care about performance.' [...] but at the end of the day, my arguments were not winning. And, I got really cynical about my experience at [company name] and I started going into work and just being like, whatever, I'm not going to care about these things anymore."*

**Gaming the system.** Another coping mechanism that surfaced during the interviews concerned various ways of gaming the system. For example, one participant explained how he deliberately gave false time estimates that bloated the effort by 100-200%. The reason for this was explained as reduced motivation because working "hard" was not more appreciated than working in reduced capacity, and to save some time to compensate for improvement efforts that had to be done "outside" of normal work hours. As P11 explained: *"[A ticket would] probably take maybe one to three days, but we knew that we don't want to take any more work, so we'll extend it and make it the whole week and just say, 'Oh yeah, this is why [it took me that long.' I've had some [air quotes] Blockers [air quotes], but they weren't really blockers. It was just more like I'm trying to slow down because I also want to make sure that management doesn't know that I can do my job very well, because then they'll think that is the pace you always need to be at. Or we're going to question your value at this company."*

**Leaving their job.** Finally, almost every participant brought up "leaving their job" as a last resort to deal with bad developer experience that they felt they couldn't change, as P6 said: "In my last company, our process had tons of friction all over the place and that led to unhappiness with my job. So it led to, I mean, I left and that was not the whole reason, but that was part of the reason was because getting anything done was hard and it, and it didn't seem like there was. The company that was focused on improving that."

## 7 Discussion

In this section, we detail the implications of our research and propose how the actionable framework we develop for understanding and improving developer experience can be used by both researchers and practitioners.

### 7.1 Implications for Researchers

Developer productivity, motivation, happiness and satisfaction, all aspects of developer experience, have been active research topics for many years. This former research identified many factors to guide understanding and the prediction of developer experience. Still, which factors are the most **important** to specific developers and how they can be **acted on to improve** their experience has not been studied extensively.

Our research culminates in a **developer experience framework** with the core concepts of developer experience factors, factor importance characteristics, the developer experience trilogy of mind, the barriers to improving experience, and the strategies and coping mechanisms developers use to address those barriers to improve their experience (see Fig. 1). We focused on highlighting *actionable* factors that can pave the way towards identifying and designing interventions to improve developer experience. The factors we identified may influence all dimensions of the trilogy of mind model (cognition, emotion and conation) that Fagerholm et al. proposed in their work [6]. For example, the development and release factors are closely related to the cognitive dimension of developer experience (i.e., how developers perceive and think about development and release tools), but they also influence developer emotions (e.g., frustration with certain tools) and developer expectations (e.g., potentially less motivation to fix legacy code). We also identified characteristics that make specific factors more or less **important** to certain developers. An important finding from our research, that corroborates previous research [3], [4], is that factors related to culture and factors that describe the developer's work context matter the most.

Our framework may be put to "work" [27] by framing theoretical propositions about how certain interventions may be used to improve developer experience. Although we report on strategies and coping mechanisms shared by our participants, we cannot claim correlation or causal relationships across the constructs captured by our framework. Our hope is that future work will expand our framework and build theories of how to improve developer experience, not just describe or predict it. For example, interventions that researchers may wish to study include encouraging and coaching developers to speak up more, to approach their work in smaller increments, and to use the factors we identify to reflect on their experiences. Future researchers should also consider developing measurement models for the factors we identified. For example, some factors may help predict retention, while other factors may be more relevant to predicting developer engagement or quality of the delivered software.

### 7.2 Key Takeaways and Industry Relevance

From our research, we also distill some key takeaways for practitioners in industry, and provide a three-step process that helps put our framework into action.

**Developer experience drives productivity, engagement and job satisfaction.** Our interviews showed that developer experience not only affects a team's ability to get work done, it also affects developer engagement and the likelihood of developers staying at their current jobs. This highlights the importance for teams and organizations to proactively manage and improve developer experience. Organization leaders need to know about the consequences of bad DX and help mitigate the barriers developers and development teams face when trying to improve their DX.

**Developer experience is an organizational challenge, not a technical one.** We found through our interviews that the barriers impeding a team's ability to improve developer experience are primarily organizational. Development teams are enabled to improve developer experience when they are given ownership over an area and allowed the time and resources to make improvements.

**Factor importance varies, but culture is key.** We discovered that the importance of different factors to individual developers depends on their role, activities and goals. However, cultural factors, such as psychological safety and aligned values, are the one exception important to all developers we interviewed. Cultural factors enable teams to come together to break through organizational challenges and realize improvements. Related industry studies (DORA[3] and McKinsey [28], Google Aristotle[4]) have similarly identified culture as a top driver of team and business performance.

**Opportunities for improvement are abundant.** All developers we interviewed shared at least one factor that recently impacted their developer experience in a negative way. This suggests that opportunities to improve developer experience are widespread and can be surfaced if leaders proactively ask team members to share and discuss any pain points.

**The framework can be put to work using an Ask-Plan-Act process.** We anticipate that our framework may be used as a foundation for systematic approaches to assessing and improving developer experience. To do so, we suggest the following three-step process:

1) *Ask: Developer experience is personal.* As factor importance is not universal, but rather dependent on the individual role, activities and goals of each developer, it is crucial to ask each and every person about their experience. Our factors and barriers can be used as prompts for collecting feedback through structured feedback mechanisms (e.g., surveys) or unstructured methods (e.g., retrospectives, one-on-one meetings). DX is important for productivity, retention and happiness–companies don't want disengaged, unproductive and unhappy employees who eventually leave.
2) *Plan: Improvement needs to happen on an Individual, Team and Organizational level.* Once developer feedback has been collected, it can be analyzed to determine the areas that need to be improved. To ensure that individuals and teams are empowered to discover and deliver improvements, we recommend assigning explicit owners for each improvement area. Improvement efforts need to be planned for and resources and time assigned. Teams need autonomy, ownership, time and resources to improve DX.
3) *Act: Continuous, small improvements are key.* To work on experience improvement, developers and teams may benefit from fast iterations and incremental feedback loops. Our distilled strategies, such as *building bridges*, *convincing others* and *creating transparency*, may help mitigate barriers to improvement. Developers can use improvement strategies to drive improvements themselves and should not rely solely on their teams and leaders to drive change. The factors can also be used to derive measures for assessing the current DX and monitoring the success of improvement efforts. This makes both the problems and the improvements more visible and actionable. Once action has been taken, the process should repeat on a continuous basis by always asking about developer experience and how it may have improved or can be improved further. Doing so will help reveal additional factors, barriers and strategies that perhaps did not emerge from the developers we interviewed.

## 8 Threats to Credibility

In contrast to quantitative studies, qualitative studies are more prone to threats to credibility than threats to validity. Validity and reliability in qualitative work mostly has to do with how careful, thorough and honest the researchers have been during data collection and analysis (Robson, 2002: 176). Therefore, in the following, we mainly describe threats to external and internal credibility of our study.

To increase our thoroughness and trustworthiness, we developed an interview guideline and thoroughly coded each transcript (which was automatically transcribed) iteratively. As transcripts were directly linked to the applicable video recording of each participant, the researchers could make sure that any errors introduced by automatic transcription were corrected. During coding, the researcher also frequently replayed a video to ensure a clear understanding of what a segment of transcript was about and to increase correct interpretation of the meaning, through not only reading the transcript, but also by hearing (tone) and seeing (body language) of the participants. This helped us ensure that we understood the context and content of the statement as much as possible.

Another threat to internal credibility for our study is interpretive validity, which describes the threat that the researchers imposed their own framework or meaning rather than understanding the perspectives of the participants and the meaning their words and explanations had (Maxwell, 1992). We mitigated this threat by paraphrasing many of the key statements made during the interviews and asked clarifying questions. In addition, while the main coding was done by the first author of this study, the other two authors were extensively involved with the axial coding process and the establishment of the emerging factors, barriers, coping mechanisms and categories. In addition, we also kept an extensive audit trail in the form of recorded videos and complete transcripts from all participants. All coding steps were documented and available to all researchers. Parts of this is also available as supplemental data.

With respect to external credibility, our sample size of 21 participants exceeds what Guest et al. recommends for achieving saturation as our group of participants were a relatively homogeneous group of active software developers. In addition, as reported, no new categories or concepts

3. A summary of the DORA research can be found at: https://services.google.com/fh/files/misc/dora_research_program.pdf

4. A summary of Google Aristotle can be found here: https://rework.withgoogle.com/print/guides/5721312655835136/

emerged during the last three interviews, which makes us confident that saturation was reached.

During the interviews, we showed participants our curated list of factors to systematically steer a discussion around importance and actionability. While this was helpful to conquer recency bias and help participants consider more factors, it also introduces the threat of confirmation bias and respondent bias. For example, participants might confirm factors in order to not offend the researcher. To conquer this threat, we only considered factors that came up before the curated factor list was shown in our analysis to distill the DX factors. In addition, we asked participants during the interviews to report what they experienced and to share details of those experiences. In these cases, it was clear that we analyzed data that represents a participant's experience and not what they thought the researcher might want to hear.

## 9 Conclusion

In this paper, we presented a conceptual and actionable framework that identifies the main factors that affect developer experience. Our research shows that a factor's level of importance strongly depends on characteristics that shape the context in which developers experience those factors. In addition, we identified barriers that prevent development teams from improving their experience as well as strategies developers employ to overcome those barriers. Finally, we discussed coping mechanisms that developers use to deal with bad developer experiences that cannot be directly improved. By improving developer experience, organizations can improve developer productivity and satisfaction, and organizational performance. Developer experience is the key to helping both developers and businesses thrive. Our framework provides a go-to reference to help organizations understand what is important to create a productive, effective and satisfying environment for developers, and points to future research for understanding, measuring and improving developer experience.

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