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Agility Is How You Do Things, Not Just How You Are Organized



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Leadership

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Photo: GETTY

HR teams have done some outstanding work responding to the

threat of coronavirus. In what is being called the world's largest work-from-home experiment, we have discovered that many organizations are not prepared. There has never been a more important time to talk about agility. But it is also important that we do not confuse resilience with agility. Crisis management is about resilience and adapting to survive, while true agility reshapes how you do your business ahead of time in a customer-centric way.

Agility is being 'at the speed of the customer' and has three elements.

In my 2018 paper, "[How Agile is Your HR?](#)," I put forth three elements of agility. These elements can be applied to how you shape your business strategy, leadership capabilities, organization model and HR. A winning people strategy is shaped around:

1. **Intersections:** Between industries, knowledge domains and aspects of the future of work.
2. **Interfaces:** Agile interfaces are well designed and bring your product or service into the lives and activities of the users while delivering quality performance to customers and rich data to the business.
3. **Insights:** The value of your HR data is important to growth, innovation, profitability and revenue potential — and it can speed up a culture of analytics.

Agility is about how you do things, not so much about how you are organized.

We have grown up in and inherited box-and-line thinking around

the organization. It helps us manage scale, drive predictability, determine wages, etc. But this has to be combined with reinventing how we work. Being digital and all the elements of the future of work — AI, robotics, the gig economy — are part of how we do things for our customers.

In my view, anything that touches an employee is about HR. If the refund process is poorly designed, it is an HR issue. Companies that have such HR expertise deeply embedded into the design of “how we work” win. There are so many areas that need bold imagination and design thinking: Augmented talent strategy, performance management and strategic workforce planning are some of the big ones. I always ask the question: Can you do anything in a company in three steps? Or can an employee make their own choices 70% of the time on how they experience the company? I believe this can be done.

An augmented workforce is a necessity.

One of the lessons we've learn in battling the pandemic is that we needed a seamless mix of digital, mental and physical capabilities to respond. We have seen doctors and medical companies use AI and analytics, technology companies create tracking or tracing apps, and people participate by physical distancing. This learning is fundamental to the future of work and how HR needs to morph into a "how work gets done differently" function that can seamlessly integrate elements of full-time employees, gig talent, service automation, smart interfaces and physical structural technology into one workforce of the future. This will change everything we know as HR today, including how we measure the value of the contributions of a given job.

HR is an uneven capability in any industry.

Let's face it: HR is an unevenly distributed capability in any industry compared to other functions. We find so many levels of sophistication, or lack of it, regardless of the brand. I have seen big brands with antiquated people practices. Even basics like HR analytics or reporting are missing or at a nascent stage. So it is difficult to paintbrush the function with what we hear from a progressive set of companies.

If you leave the hype aside, the majority of companies have HR functions that don't match up to the customer side of thinking. For us to make any decent impact on the future of the world, we need to first even out this range of low to high capability to an acceptable narrow band. Agility can help us get there.

Don't mimic; get inspired.

There was a point in time where you would not be considered great HR if you did not copy GE's [9-box grid](#). But copying best practices has led us to be a copy-paste HR function that does not apply its thinking to the business context. This applies to business practices too. Companies that copy end up being rigid because they have been too lazy to do the hard work of building what works for their business. While there is the broad view of agility that is applicable to all industries and companies of all sizes, there is a need to define agility for your company. For instance, [ING](#) and [Spotify](#) have made tribes and squads popular. Companies that have gotten on the bandwagon of being organized in tribes and squads realize that 70% of agility is not how you are organized, but how you do things.

Tomorrow's agility comes from yesterday's decisions.

The need to act is vital, and it begins with the customer. What we do for the customers is the only guiding principle in how things should be done in HR. If there is something we do in HR that does not directly fit what we do for our customers, we must drop it. It is important for leadership teams to spend the time applying the three elements of agility to create a rapid transition toward it.

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