

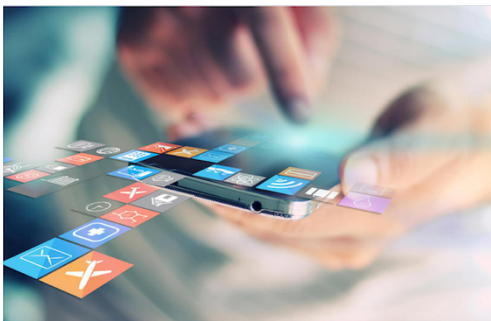
THE AGILE LEARNING ORGANIZATION

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WE NOW ACCEPT THE FACT THAT LEARNING IS A LIFELONG PROCESS OF KEEPING ABREAST OF CHANGE. AND THE MOST PRESSING TASK IS TO TEACH PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS HOW TO LEARN. – PETER DRUCKNER

PART 1: KEY CHANGES WE SHOULD MAKE IN OUR APPROACH

I found an interesting quote of one CEO asking: What happens if we invest in developing our people and then they leave us? But the more crucial question is: What happens if we don't and they stay??



A 2015 Harvard Business Review article, titled “**Why Businesses Don’t Learn,**” presented an interesting viewpoint about organizational resistance to learning. The writers, Francesca Gino and Bradley Staats, argue that there are four main reasons why businesses fail to take learning seriously, despite best intentions to the contrary.

1. The first reason is that **organizations are afraid of failure**. They are biased toward success and avoid the realities of failure at all costs. The concept of failure triggers anger, pain, and fear. Most businesses try to sweep failure under the rug and avoid the negative feelings instead of embracing it as a learning tool. Experimentation involves failure and lots of it. To be truly innovative, businesses need to focus less energy on trying to achieve perfection and more energy on accepting mistakes.
2. Second, **most companies have a bias toward action, and they neglect to engage in the important practice of reflection**. What went wrong? What can we do better next time? How can we improve? What other competencies are needed on the team? Shorter work cycles and project retrospectives are an effective strategy for overcoming the fear of action.
3. Third, there is an unproductive tendency toward conformity. **Many companies are afraid of rocking the boat in their industries**. They want to fit in, and they have the false assumption that “sameness” is attractive to an existing client base. They don’t dare to be different and, as a result, they end up in jeopardy.

4. Finally, Gino and Staats argue that big businesses **rely too heavily on the guidance of outside experts or consultants**. The best source of information is from the people on the ground, who actually do the work. What does an outside consultant know about the inner workings of team dynamics and project experimentation? External “help” simply adds an unnecessary layer of complexity to a fairly straightforward solution: involve frontline employees in brainstorming and decision making. They are in direct communication with the customers and they are the most precious resource.

Many companies fail to recognize the economic value their employees bring to the organization. It takes time to see a return on talent investment but doing so requires an awareness of the employee lifecycle. Learning and competence development is a critical component in the employee value proposition – it is vital for their growth, engagement and retention. **Building internal knowledge and skills leads to faster innovation, which is necessary for survival under changing environment**. So, the critical question is **how to do it on an organization level?**

There are few thoughts below:

Empowerment and Trust

In agile, we talk a lot about empowering people i.e. letting them make decisions for themselves. So how do we empower people as employees, when it comes to their learning and development? Are they in the driver’ seat?

In my last job, I asked my superior whether I can attend a conference to broaden my horizon, get new inspirations and understand better what is coming in terms of new technology developments and improvements. As Learning manager doing this job for more than a decade, I felt pretty confident that I know what is best for me and what I want and need to learn to do my job well not only for the time being but also for the future. However, the answer was NO. It was surprising – how can my superior know better than me what I need and want to learn to do my job best I can? It really disappointed me that I cannot use my personal training budget for training that I believed was really adding value for me – at the end I ended up attending and paying for the conference on my own anyway – because I still believed it was an investment worth to make.

However, this is unfortunately a unique case, as most people would say ok, it is not approved then I am not attending. **But isn’t it a time to let employees take responsibility for their own training?** If they have a dedicated personal training budget to use – why should someone else be deciding whether it is the right training for them? If they attend not valuable training – they will learn their lessons and be more careful next time – isn’t it the kind of behavior, we are looking for from our employees? If we do not trust them that they will choose a right training for them how we can trust them they will do the job right???

Trust is a key baseline for empowering people – if we do not trust them that they do the best for themselves and for the company, we cannot succeed in the future – with self-organizing teams taking over – this is the critical shift we need to make.

Shift Responsibility from Manager to Employee

In the future, the only competitive advantage that remains is knowledge, continuous learning, and innovation. The company that learns the fastest and transforms that learning into new products and services (that the customers want and need) will have the competitive advantage.¹

The success of Agile learning initiatives is dependent on the shift of responsibility from the manager to the employees. In order to make the shift, **management should focus on creating environments that invite people to communicate and mingle.** People need to feel free to develop in any direction they find interesting, challenging, and rewarding, as long as it benefits the whole organization.

The emphasis in Agile is that learning should be easy. Instead of using benchmark figures and best practices, employees should be given the freedom and flexibility to experiment, improvise and absorb new information and apply the knowledge in fresh concept.

PART 2: KEY CHANGES WE SHOULD MAKE IN OUR SET-UP

COMPANIES ARE NOT INNOVATIVE, PEOPLE ARE. JURGEN APPELO, MANAGEMENT 3.0

Continuous Organizational Learning

Agile is about creating an environment where people can thrive and grow and give back: to each other, to themselves, to the company, and to society. The best way to achieve that goal is through continuous learning and development. Through learning, the organization is stronger and more competitive and has the ability to adapt to new circumstances or changes in the market more easily and faster. **Agile doesn't differentiate between working and learning – you learn and constantly improve.**

Agile is built on the understanding that people learn most effectively in small amounts – employees process smaller pieces of information quickly and just-in-time, instead of focusing on a large, comprehensive overview of everything.

Best practice is dead. Build your own practice. Innovate

People need to feel free to develop in any direction they find interesting, challenging, and rewarding, as long as it benefits the whole organization. The emphasis in agile is that learning should be easy. Instead of using benchmark figures and best practices, employees should be given the freedom and flexibility to experiment and absorb new information. Best practices are probably the best at someone else's place, so they have to find their own way, and it's different for each company. Below are few suggestions on how to connect working and learning, and innovate:

“Lunch and Learn” is a practice that facilitates quick learning. The phrase was born from the notion that people should be able to use their lunch hour to exchange ideas and try new things. **Agility is about learning quickly from experience and apply the knowledge in fresh concept.**²

¹ Thoren, Pia-Maria, Agile People: A Radical Approach for HR & Managers (That Leads to Motivated Employees)

^{2,3} Thoren, Pia-Maria. Agile People: A Radical Approach for HR & Managers)

The concept of **“Pairing”** at work is another popular practice, which is when people pair up to design, test, manage, or simply explore new ideas together. It’s based on the idea of the buddy system. Having a partner helps to make people more accountable to themselves, their buddy, and the company. Even in a partnership, self-reliance and self-development are critical in agile learning. It’s the starting point for everything that comes after. **If you don’t take a vested interest in yourself, your education, and your own happiness, how can you reasonably expect anyone else to?**³

“Fail fast” is a core mantra in agile. It indicates that failure is simply a part of constant learning. We need to dare to try and make it easy to try. Thomas Edison famously said, “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” **Failure plays a key role in discovery and continuous learning.** Give the people the freedom to learn from mistakes as long as they are small. Intuitive, adaptive learning by creating the possibilities for mistakes and the safe space to make them is how people learn. As they learn, they will take steps forward if you just enable that opportunity.

A **“Guild”** is an organic and wide-reaching “community of interest”, a group of people that wants to share knowledge, tools, code, and practices. The goal of the guild is to become better in what we do. This can be done by discussing new technologies, sharing experiences, and inviting people from outside. The guild is however not intended for discussion of work-related issues – the goal is to increase the knowledge of the people who attend.⁴ One of the things you need to take into account here is how to run guilds for distributed teams – personally in local offices, virtually for all or combine both options as your technology allows.

Finally, on a company level you can run so called **“Exploration days”** or in tech world also known as **“Hackathons”**. Exploration days are meant as an invitation to your employees to learn and develop themselves by running experiments and exploring new ideas. The goal is to get employees to learn as much as possible and perhaps even to come up with new ideas and insights – this concept will of course work much better if not made mandatory for people – they should be able to decide for themselves if they want to join or not – ideally, they should organize it, because if you organize it, you participate.

Lots of tech companies included this approach in their daily practices – Adobe has its **Kickbox** – an actionable process for discovering new opportunities, validating customer engagement, and evaluating new business potential. Google has a **20 percent time policy** for their employees to work on what they think will most benefit Google. Atlassian has **ShipIT days** – 24 hours to innovate.

Without innovation, there is no future as mentioned Eric Ries in his book The Lean StartUp – some aspects of problem solving come from social learning, blended learning, interactions, and brown bags (Lunch and Learn). That’s why you should embrace all those new ways of learning - it is only up to you and your company to try and see what will work for you best.

⁴ Van Roosmalen, Ralph: Doing it! Management 3.0 Experiences

As Pia Maria Thoren summarizes in her book Agile People: today, continuous changes through technological advances means we need to always be learning. It's a never-ending. **To remain viable and competitive, employees need to take the lead on their own education.** Traditional learning methods are becoming outdated. Our brains work differently than they did in the past because of all the new stimuli coming at us. We process information faster and need to find new ways of digesting and processing it.

Modern companies understand that simply sending their employees off-site for a course in a certain subject is no longer sufficient. A single training intervention isn't going to close a performance gap. Courses have been replaced by learning experiences in which various activities are spread across time and space to maximize absorption. We are limited only by our imagination as we move into the future. **We need cross-functional, interdisciplinary, continual, self-directed formal and informal education as learning is the only way to adapt.**

PART 3: LEARNING IN THE FLOW OF WORK

WITHOUT INNOVATION, THERE IS NO FUTURE. ERIC RIES

Eric Ries describes in his book The Lean Startup how the organization that is able to learn the fastest will win. The world is changing faster and faster. If we look back five years ago—could you have imagined products like Uber and Airbnb, for instance? To make sure we and our team members can keep up with new technologies, and do not face an **“Uber Moment”** in our industry or market, we need to keep developing our competence. However, telling people they have to learn a new tool is not the “optimal” way to go.

People should start learning themselves from an intrinsic motivation and **it is a task of manager, to create an environment where people are challenged to get out of their comfort zone, where they are invited to learn and address their intrinsic motivation.**

The real key will be **intelligently recommending the „right content to each user“ in a personalized way** – similar to what Spotify does with its “Discover Weekly” – as they send you individually personalized playlist each week – and you think how they can know better than you what you like to listen?

This is the future for learning, too – to make the content most relevant for each user at the time they need it and where they need it. **We want the learning to be so perfectly targeted that we immediately look at them, learn, and go back to work.** This means that companies need to think about more integrated solutions and integrated here means full stack of learning solutions available that includes all the elements – each being used for different types of employee's development need.

Learning in the Flow of Work

Josh Bersin in his article [A New Paradigm For Corporate Training](#) highlights that the corporate training industry has always been impacted by new technology and over the last 20 years we've been through 4 evolutions, each driven by technological and economic change – **we are now at the beginning of the fifth evolution – called “Learning in the Flow of work”.**

As he continues – many vendors have started to use the paradigm of Netflix or Spotify, defining learning as a series of playlists or content channels. You publish a lot of content, you subscribe to channels or interest areas, and the content is promoted and recommended to you through job matching, AI-based recommendations, and your own history of consumption. This is reality.

However, Netflix and Spotify are entertainment platforms – and with their content they tend to make people spend as much time as possible on their platforms. This is however different approach than in learning – we want people to learn quickly and apply it back in their jobs just-in-time.

[LinkedIn just released their latest research](#) (4,000+ L&D and business professionals) and asked people how their workplace learning could be improved. Guess what **the #1 issue was: people do not have enough time.** “Getting employees to make more time for learning” was the #1 challenge they cited, and among the learners who responded, 58% want to learn at their own pace and 49% want to learn in the flow of work.

This research is totally consistent with the [latest research from O’Reilly](#), which also finds that approximately 50% of all learning interactions from their technical community (software engineers, analysts, and other technical professionals) is for “in the moment of need” technical support. These are people who understand the basics of their jobs but want pinpoint information, technical answers, code snippets, or quick answers to questions they face right now. I think we can all agree that everyone needs this kind of support.

Bersin research in 2015 found that among the 700+ organizations they studied; **the average employee only has 24 minutes a week for “formal learning.”** People simply do not have as much time as they’d like to learn in a formal way, **so this informal “in-the-flow” work is just necessary for success.**

Thus, as Bersin concludes, what we ultimately want to do **is embed learning into the platform in which people work daily, so the systems can coach and train them to be better on the job.** And this is where all this digital learning is likely to go. One example for all:

A large distributor has more than 20,000 sales and service professionals around the world (this is a real company.) They all use Salesforce.com as their daily system for work and activity tracking. Why wouldn’t this system promote and recommend learning whenever they open an opportunity, or suggest simple videos or tips to help remind the salesperson how to price, manage, or close a deal? This kind of solution is in the market today.

I believe it is now task for all of us to think how to add the principles of spaced learning, designed repetition, practice, experience and competency-driven recommendations right into our employee’s work environment.

Articles you may also like:

[Agile HR – Agile isn’t for Tech Anymore](#)

[Agile Learning – It is How Good You Want to be](#)

