



The impact of Learning Agility on the Growth in Performance

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The first article in this year's sequence of articles is going to be on the topic of Learning Agility and its relationship with the growth in a person's performance over time within their respective job function. The analysis was first introduced in the article on "The Potential of Learning Agility – Research Paper" by Haring, Shankar, and Hofkes (2016), which merely stated the results that were found. However, what were the underlying mechanisms for the relationships that was observed? Do the results that were observed make sense? The goal of this article is to delve into the literature and investigate the possible arguments for the relationships between Learning Agility and growth in performance.

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The refined definition

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Learning Agility

What is Learning Agility? The refined definition of Learning Agility is the ability for someone to rapidly develop new effective behaviour based on new experiences and to easily move from idea to idea both within and across experiences. It is a mix of flexibility and speed within the learning process, whereby one is able to approach situations from multiple perspectives (flexibility) and to learn new things quickly (speed).

Learning Agility is measured by assessing the individual's personality, motivation and behaviour in a work environment. Personality gives an indication of the individual's character traits, whereas the motivation factor suggests what the individual desires from their work environment. Lastly, the behaviour questionnaire asks those who work closely with the individual, to indicate whether they actually display the desired behaviours in the work environment. These combined provide the necessary insights in measuring an individual's Learning Agility, which is made up of four domains and one transcending factor.

Learning Agility Model



The Analysis

The relationship between Learning Agility and current performance of an individual has been well documented (Haring, Shankar, & Hofkes, 2016). However, the analysis was taken a step further, delving into what the relationship was between Learning Agility and the growth in performance over time. The analysis was explorative in nature, due to the novelty of the question. Therefore, is it overall Learning Agility that is important in ensuring that the individual improves within their own function over time? Or do one of the underlying Learning Agility domains or transcending factor play a bigger role?

Data was exported of individuals who had completed a 360 feedback performance evaluation of the same function at time 1 and at time 2, which was usually a year apart. The assessment was based on a profile, which was comprised of competencies that were important in measuring the performance of an individual in their respective function. The questionnaire focuses on behaviours that are displayed in a working environment and, is not only answered by the individual themselves, but by their manager(s), colleagues, subordinates or a combination thereof.

The data set consisted of 25 people and a correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between Learning Agility and the growth in performance between time 1 and time 2. The data set may be considered small, but the goal of the analysis was to gain insights into Learning Agility and growth in performance, which has never been conducted before. There was a strong positive correlation found between People Agility and Self-awareness on growth in performance score; 0.48 and 0.40 respectively. The other elements of Learning Agility also had a positive correlations, however none were significant.

The question that remained was: why is it that these two elements have such a strong relationship and nothing else? Delving into the literature, psychological theories were discovered that could be applied to the results, which would explain the strong correlations that were observed in the analysis.

People Agility

The literature that explains the strong positive correlation between People Agility and change in performance stems predominantly from the social psychology domain. The concepts used are the corner stones that social psychology have been built on.



The explanation starts with the overarching concept of “team learning”. The idea of team learning is the belief that the “intelligence of the team exceeds the intelligence of the individuals in the team” (Senge, 1990). This definition focuses on the team as a whole, emphasizing the idea that a team working together will be more successful, since the team has the expanded resource pool of the whole group to call on. However, this idea can also be applied to an individual, where it is believed that those who utilise the team to learn, will learn more than they would individually, because they are exposed to the experiences, thoughts, talents, and skills of others (Boyle, 2005; Goleman, 1995). Those high on People Agility like to investigate other’s ideas and values and embrace others from different backgrounds and cultures, which is comparable to the idea of utilising the experiences, thoughts, and skills of others within the team. They are more receptive to the views and ideas of those around them, which has the benefit of increasing the knowledge that the individual has when approaching unique situations.

Team learning emphasizes the importance of learning from the people around oneself.

The mechanism that facilitates team learning can be attributed to the social learning theory, which was postulated by the famous social-cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura. Simply put, social learning is the idea that one observes someone and then imitate(s) that behaviour. This is the corner stone of social-learning. However, in an article by Collins, Brown, and Newman (1989), they emphasized the importance of the underlying cognitive processes, which simply put, means how the problem is solved. This idea accentuates the cognitive aspect of social-learning.

They believed that the underlying cognitive process should be spoken out loud or written down, allowing the individual the ability to see the steps that are taken to solve the problem(s) at hand. This will allow the individual who is observing to internalize the process shown more accurately (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). Research has shown that this process can be applied to many complex topics, such as math, writing, assertive communication, collaboration, self-regulation, (self-) assessment, and (psycho) motor skills (Gog & Rummel, 2010). On top of that, it has also been shown that those who learn through social learning also increase their self-efficacy or in other words, their belief in themselves to accomplish the task at hand (Gog & Rummel, 2010).

Collins et al. (1989) emphasized that it was the expert's responsibility to demonstrate the underlying cognitive process. However, when talking about those who are People Agile, they seek this clarification from those around them, wanting to learn the processes that others use to tackle and solve problems.

They inadvertently take the responsibility into their own hands, by going out of their way to discover the process from those around them, making those in their surroundings the experts.



Self-awareness

The strong positive correlation with Self-awareness may seem obvious, with those who are aware of their strengths and weaknesses and have a strong sense of self-development utilising that information to improve their performance. However, what is interesting to note is that the literature indicates that there is an underlying mechanism that explains this success.



The literature illustrates the importance of self-management, stating that those who self-manage, “know where they want to go in their lives, develop a plan for getting there, and execute the plan efficiently” (Williams, Verble, Price, & Layne, 1995). This self-management is based on intrinsic motivations, or motivations that come from within the individual and not from external sources. It is believed that the most important factors within self-management are self-development and feedback seeking (London, Larsen, & Thisted, 1999), which are a combination of motivational drives and behaviour. Self-development is self-evident, where the individual strives to improve their skills and tries to expose themselves to unique opportunities which can facilitate further development (Greenhaus, 1987). As mentioned, this motivational drive comes from within the individual and is the cornerstone of the individual wanting to improve.

Feedback seeking behaviour is the second factor and is influenced by the first factor, since the drive for self-development means that the individual will want to know how they are doing. This emphasis for asking feedback has a few benefits for the individual's development. Using feedback, the individual is able to accurately evaluate how others view their work (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Tsui, 1991), meaning that they are able to adapt when necessary, ensuring that they perform well based on what is needed by the organisation (London & Smither, 1999). Not only that, asking for feedback can also reduce the uncertainties within the task (Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995; Morrison & Bies, 1991), meaning that when an individual is asked to perform new tasks or if they are thrown into a new situation, they are aware of what is expected of them.

These two traits help the process of self-management. The willingness to develop and improve in combination with asking for feedback not only helps generate a concrete goal, but also instances where the individual receives the input needed to check whether they are on track in attaining their goals. Furthermore, there also the contributions of personality, with research demonstrating that openness to experience can help individuals who are faced with work demands that fluctuate. These individuals are more likely to be open to unique work related experiences and content, which can boost the range of knowledge and skills that they learn (Pace & Brannick, 2010). Openness to experiences, in combination with other personality factors, have also been shown to foster the interest for continuous learning, the drive to plan such learning, and to overcome any challenges and obstacles that may arise (London & Smither, 1999). Not only are these individuals then driven to self-develop, but they are also driven to learn!



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Conclusion

The analysis investigating the relationship between Learning Agility and growth in performance was both novel and unique. Therefore, it was necessary to delve into established research to investigate possible arguments that could be used to explain the relationships that were observed.

A correlational analysis was conducted to investigate whether there was a relationship between Learning Agility and growth in performance, which was measured over time. The investigation did not only use Learning Agility, but also included the underlying domains and transcending factor. There was a strong positive correlation found between People Agility (0.48) and Self-awareness (0.40) on growth in performance.

The importance of People Agility in improving ones performance can be attributed to the concept of “team learning”, whereby the individual utilises the intelligence, experience, skills and talents of those around them to learn. This learning process is based on the theory of social learning, in which the individual uses the people around them as examples (models), whereby they are able to gain insights into unique problem solving techniques to complex and distinctive problems.

On top of that, Self-awareness also plays a role, with the underlying mechanism of self-management contributing to the increase in performance over time. Those who utilise self-management techniques are those who create their own goals, plan how to attain those goals, and self monitor their progress.

The success of self-management can be attributed to the need for self-development and for feedback seeking behaviour.

Self-development is the individual’s need to improve, which strengthens the individuals need for feedback, since this helps them figure out which goals they need to work on, how best to achieve that goal, and to monitor their progress.

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Jair Shankar is a Senior Research Psychologist at HFMtalentindex International. He has lived and studied all over the world and is driven by a constant curiosity about the why of things. He puts his passion into practice by using the millions of assessment data from HFMtalentindex to expose new patterns in the relationship between job performance and personal qualities, and to make these practical for our clients' (HR) strategies.



Koen Hofkes
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Koen Hofkes is an organisational psychologist and co-founder of HFMtalentindex International. He collaborates with international organisations in developing their leadership models. In recent years he has specialised in the design and implementation of innovative online methods to identify and grow people qualities and talents within organisations.

Literature

Are you interested in learning more about the subject?
Consult the following professional publications:

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