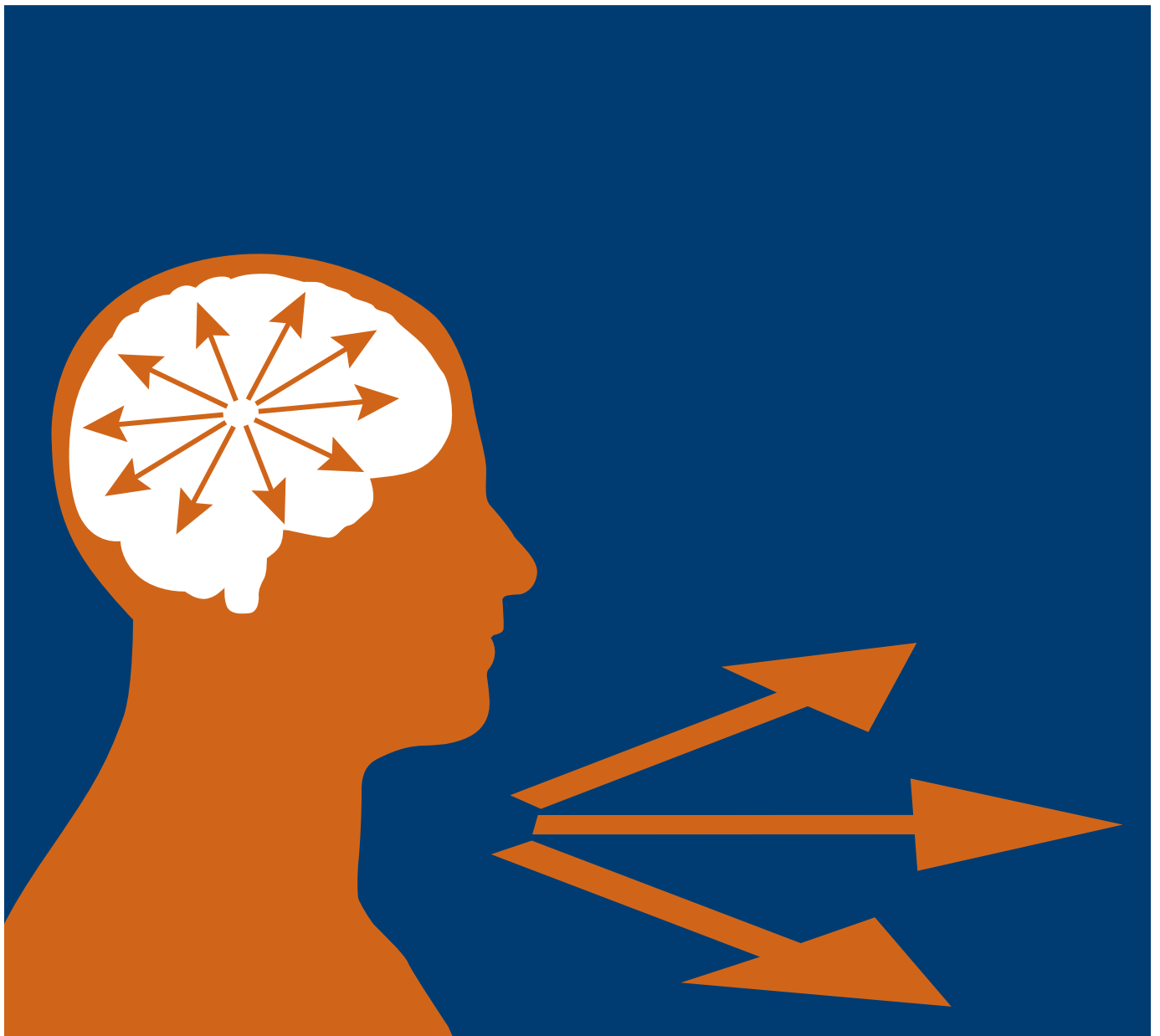


Learning Agility

Koen Hofkes and Vittorio Busato



Learning Agility Management summary

The world in which organisations operate today is becoming increasingly complex. Organisational changes are commonplace. Roles and functions within organisations are changing faster and faster. This places high demands on the learning ability of (HR) managers and employees. A focus on Learning Agility offers a new perspective on what employees can do for the organisation.

Learning Agility is the ability to develop new effective behaviour quickly and flexibly based on new experiences. Employees with high Learning Agility benefit more from their experiences, look for new challenges and are open to feedback. Employees with low Learning Agility learn little or nothing from new experiences and stick to old habits. Learning Agility provides organisations with particular insight into the potential of employees. A high degree of Learning Agility proves to be a good predictor of the persons with high potentials in the organisation, whom will be the leaders of the future.

Learning Agility consists of five dimensions: People Agility, Results Agility, Change Agility, Mental Agility and Self-awareness. Based on validated measuring instruments to measure competencies, motivations and the personality of employees, HFMtalentindex has compiled a practical instrument: the Learning Agility Scan. This tool clearly shows how people score on the different dimensions.

HFMtalentindex helps organisations to benefit more from talent. An explicit approach to learning agility of employees is the key for organisations to achieve future goals and strategic ambitions in a complex and rapidly changing environment.

Would you like to know more about Learning Agility or would you like to try the **Learning Agility Scan**? Please contact us at +31 (0)85 401 50 50 or via info@hfm.nl.

Learning Agility

“Someone who learns something, becomes a slightly different person.”

(Jan Elshout, Emeritus Professor of Psychology UvA)

Nowadays, organisations must constantly anticipate a complex and rapidly changing world. The mission of HFMtalentindex is to help organisations make more effective use of talent. To this end, HFMtalentindex focuses explicitly on the Learning Agility of employees. This article explains why.



Introduction

The environment in which organisations operate today changes rapidly and is becoming increasingly complex. Previously successful business models are under discussion. Organisational changes are the order of the day. Roles and functions within organisations are changing faster and faster. An employee may be great at his or her job, but it may well be that due to unexpected demands from the environment, the job will soon no longer exist or require a completely different approach.

All this places high demands on the flexibility and learning ability of (HR) managers and employees. After all, a successful implementation of planned organisational changes requires an optimal response to the complex and rapidly changing environment. The flexible use of (up-and-coming) talent and insight into the talent available within the organisation is essential. Incurable organisations will not survive; organisations must be able to learn, to adapt to the environment in order to appropriate this complex environment according to their needs and to reduce the uncertainty for the future as much as possible.

Speed and flexibility

A concept from specialised literature that can make a constructive contribution in this context is Learning Agility.

Learning Agility is the ability to use new experiences to develop new effective behaviour quickly and flexibly and to abolish ineffective behaviour. Employees with high Learning Agility benefit more from their experiences, look for new challenges and are open to feedback. Employees with low Learning Agility learn little or nothing from new experiences and stick to old habits. For these employees, it will be considerably harder to adapt to situations that require new effective behaviour, with a negative performance for the organisation as a result.

Publications in the trade press clarify that Learning Agility distinguished itself from concepts such as intelligence, learning, metacognition (reflection about thinking), motivation or a personality trait such as 'Openness to Experiences' (in addition to 'Extraversion', 'Emotional Stability', 'Conscientiousness' and 'Friendliness', one of the famous Big Five personality dimensions). Learning Agility combines aspects of these concepts – and it is this eclectic mix that turns it into a new and distinctive concept.

Learning Agility provides organisations with particular insight into the potential of employees. Learning Agility explicitly disconnects potential from performance. The degree of Learning Agility indicates what someone will be able to do in the future. **Employees with high Learning Agility are not only good problem solvers, they are also problem finders.** This offers a different perspective on what employees can do for the organisation.

Latent Talent

Understanding the Learning Agility of employees will provide positive results for organisations. Nowadays, the question of our customers on how to make optimal use of the talent of their employees is no longer limited to merely the managers within the organisations. The question has become much broader and involves employees at every level of the organisation. After all, employees are the most important asset of organisations and there may be a lot of latent talent among them. Learning Agility visualises that talent, which helps organisations to better prepare for the future.

Scientific research tells us that a high degree of Learning Agility proves to be a good predictor of who the high potentials are in the organisation, the leaders of the future. In a complex and rapidly changing world, this understanding can give organisations a significant competitive advantage. Moreover, Learning Agility of employees proves to be a better predictor than their previous work performance.

Research also shows that poorly performing executives often lack the willingness to learn from their experiences. In new situations, they rely too heavily on their old skills and habits, which may have brought them success in their careers before, but which are no longer sufficient due to new demands from the environment. If, on the other hand, executives are open to feedback on their ineffective behaviour, they perform better and also prove to be capable of abolishing old habits. This benefits the organisation as a whole.

Safe environment

Hence, Learning Agility has everything to do with the willingness to change, with being open to feedback and wanting to learn from it, with adaptability and flexibility if so required by the work situation and/or environment.

It is known from change management literature that the success of organisational changes also depends on this willingness and flexibility. Resistance to organisational change, whether it is high or low, usually does not contribute to a successful implementation.

Organisations that give people space to experiment how best to cope with new demands from the environment, that provide their employees with a psychologically safe environment to take risks and have them learn from their mistakes by providing feedback, perform better. After all, such organisations encourage their employees to get more out of their potential.

High Learning Agility

Branch Manager (32) at an

employment agency: "We will soon move to a new form of online services. This will allow us to serve our customers even better. I'm already looking forward to familiarising myself with it. If my immediate colleagues experience any difficulties with this system, I will gladly help them. And if I see that the system is a clear improvement, I usually manage to convince even my most cynical colleagues."

Low Learning Agility

Manager Social Affairs (61) at a

municipality: "Sometimes I think that no organisation is a bigger toy of politics than ours. For the umpteenth time we need to cut jobs and components. My department will again be reorganised significantly. Frankly, I am done with it and find it increasingly difficult to recharge myself."

Measuring Learning Agility

Research has shown that Learning Agility consists of five dimensions, one of which is the factor that acts as a kind of motor for the other four dimensions. Based on validated measuring instruments to measure competencies, motivations and the personality of employees, HFMtalentindex has developed a practical instrument: the Learning Agility Scan. This tool clearly shows how people score on the different dimensions of Learning Agility. This measuring instrument also gives an overall score of the level of a person's Learning Agility.

The Learning Agility Scan focuses on a number of specific personality traits, motivations and behavioural aspects. Together they represent a person's Learning Agility.

We will now briefly describe the five dimensions, with a special specification of the 'driving' factor. To illustrate, we will also give some examples from our Learning Agility Scan.

People Agility

Employees who score high on this dimension are constructive towards others and share a lot with colleagues. They are open to employees with different backgrounds and opinions and also adapt more easily to people from other cultures. These employees want to understand others well and take their opinion seriously. As a result, they easily establish contacts and learn more from the input and feedback of others.

Example

- **Personality:** "I assume that people have good intentions."
- **Motivation:** Looking for solutions with others.
- **Behaviour:** Is interested in the values and norms of others.

Results Agility

Employees who score high on this dimension, feel a strong need to be successful. They are always looking for the best ways to achieve a result or objective. These employees are ambitious, self-confident of themselves and also radiate this confidence to others while performing well under pressure. They remain focused and easily distinguish essentials from side issues, so they also reach their goals in unexpected situations.

Mental Agility

Employees who score high on this dimension do not shy away from complex problems and ambiguous situations. On the contrary, they like to analyse and also like to present their analyses to others as an inspiration. Such employees think outside the box, are creative, have a lot of ideas and an open perspective. This allows them to recognise patterns in new experiences more quickly. They understand the situation and what they can learn from these experiences more easily.

Change Agility

Employees who score high on this dimension are characterised by a constant curiosity. They do not shy away from unknown, new issues and situations, but tackle them head on. These employees like to experiment, try out new things, and they experience new things with more passion. As a result, they experience more. They are intrinsically motivated to investigate anything and find pleasure in 'everything that's new'.

Self-awareness

As already mentioned, Self-awareness is a special element of Learning Agility, since a high score reinforces the other four dimensions while a low score has the opposite effect and limits these dimensions. Employees with a high score in Self-awareness are aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They consider their own behaviour and performance with a critical eye and learn from them. They are focused on how they can improve the way they do things. Employees who are aware of how they can improve in something learn more effectively than employees who are (more) easily satisfied with themselves.

- **Personality:** "I do more than is expected of me."
- **Motivation:** To outperform myself.
- **Behaviour:** Remains calm under pressure.

- **Personality:** "I like to resolve complex issues."
- **Motivation:** Well investigating matters.
- **Behaviour:** Investigates the issue before drawing conclusions.

- **Personality:** "I like to visit new places."
- **Motivation:** Solving problems I have never had to deal with before.
- **Behaviour:** Looks at new things and changes with a fresh view, without being tied to the existing method.

- **Personality:** "I like to think about myself."
- **Motivation:** Having space for development.
- **Behaviour:** Asks feedback to learn from it.

Development opportunities

We know from specialised literature that personality traits are relatively stable. Motivations and Self-awareness are easier to influence and train. Organisations that want to encourage the Learning Agility of their employees ought to focus in particular on the development of Self-awareness. After all, more Self-awareness leads to higher scores on the other four dimensions of Learning Agility and thus to a higher overall score on Learning Agility. This, in turn, results in new employees showing new and effective behaviour faster when required by the environment.

High Learning Agility

Accountant (40) at a financial institution:

"I used to spend almost all my time with numbers, but in recent years I have increasingly become the consultant to the customer."

It is expected that this development will only intensify. It means that I had to learn many new things. In particular, how I make sure my advice is not only good, but also understandable and manageable for the customer. It wasn't that easy at the beginning, especially because I am not really a 'people's person'. I am, however, curious and very self-critical. So I always paid close attention to the effect of my approach. Continuously evaluating and setting clear goals for myself. That way you learn quickly. In fact, I am now a mentor in this area for new employees.

Low Learning Agility

Office Manager (44) at an IT-organisation:

"A short time ago, I went to a customer service course for the fourth time. Frankly, I don't see the use of it anymore, I don't really gain any inspiration there."

You either are customer-friendly or you aren't. Why should I work on my customer-friendliness if my customers rarely call my attention to it?

Why focus on Learning Agility?

"To our customers it is important that the services we offer as an organisation suit their current and changing business processes. In a world that is changing faster and faster, it is therefore important that our people can quickly pick up their own new insights and methods. A focus on the Learning Agility of our staff can help us do so."

(Ariane van der Kooij, Manager Human Capital Development, USG People)

HFMtalentindex helps organisations to benefit more from talent. HFMtalentindex is convinced that an explicit approach to Learning Agility of employees is the key for organisations to achieve future goals and strategic ambitions in a complex and rapidly changing environment. A focus on the Learning Agility of employees helps organisations to reduce the uncertainty of the future.

High Learning Agility

Actuary (61) at an insurer: "In our industry one always has to wait and see how many people will switch at the end of the year. Two years ago I, inspired by my grandson, introduced the idea to develop an app, primarily to make the submission of invoices easier for our customers. It has proven a great success. I enjoyed the space that my superiors gave me to contribute to the realisation of the app. However, I also enjoy the fact that younger colleagues, who were initially sceptical, are now so excited about it."

Low Learning Agility

Teacher (38) at a secondary school: "Most of my colleagues are more performance-oriented than I am. The introduction of computer-based education, for example. All this technology is just too much for me. It also takes away my motivation. What do they expect from me? That I understand everything? Some of my colleagues are just showoffs. I don't need to be able to take apart an engine to get a driving license, do I? Children handle computers a lot better than most adults do anyway."

Analyses

Initial analyses of our own database also provide interesting results on gender, age and educational differences regarding Learning Agility. Some notable findings:

- Women score higher on the dimension People Agility, men score higher on Mental Agility.
- Women score higher on Self-awareness than men.
- With regard to age, the youngest employees (17-24 years) score the lowest on Self-awareness, followed by the oldest employees (55-64).
- Employees between 25 and 34 score the highest on Self-awareness.
- The group of employees from 25 to 34 had the highest score on Results Agility – an illustration that they like being successful.
- Employees with a university education score the highest on Self-awareness, followed by employees with higher professional education, only high school and intermediate vocational education respectively.
- Employees with a university education also score the highest on Results Agility and Mental Agility, followed by employees with higher professional education, high school or intermediate vocational education.
- Employees with an intermediate vocational education score the highest on People Agility, meaning higher than employees with a university education or higher professional education.

In conclusion

“Someone who learns something, becomes a slightly different person.”

There is a good reason that this statement is printed above this article. Organisations that focus on the Learning Agility of their employees and help them develop (if necessary), will create different, better employees. Employees who are fast and flexible in their learning process, employees who adapt to new demands from the environment, employees who contribute to making this environment a little less complex and uncertain for the organisation and who are ready for the future. And sooner or later, this will pay off in better performance.

Are you interested in determining and developing the **Learning Agility** of your employees? HFMtalentindex would be delighted to help you! We will also gladly tell you about the research we have conducted in this area so far. Additional information?

Call +31 (0)85 401 50 50 or send an e-mail to info@hfm.nl.

About the authors:



Koen Hofkes is an organisational psychologist and co-founder of HFM and HFMtalentindex. As a consultant, he has worked with leading international organisations on the development of their leadership models. In recent years, he has specialised in the design and implementation of innovative online methods to identify and develop talent and human quality in organisations.



Vittorio Busato is a psychologist and writer. He has taught and conducted research at the Faculty of Psychology of the University of Amsterdam. He earned his PhD at the University of Amsterdam on the dissertation study ‘Learning Styles further analysed’. Busato has published in several national and international scientific journals. Some of the titles he has written: *Psychologie al dente* (Fosfor), *Intelligentie. Zin & Onzin* (Swets & Zeitlinger), *Het geheim van de uitblinker* (Bert baBakker) and *Leve de psychologie!* (Bert Bakker).

Literature about Learning Agility

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

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