Exploring the Agile Workforce: Are You Ready? (June 2020)

Executives from across the country have talked with MBA Research staff about the importance of an agile workforce. <u>Many businesses have started to think about flexibility and the ability to embrace change as qualities of primary importance as they hire new staff</u>. Some businesses put qualities of this nature over actual technical skills as they look to build workforces that can withstand—and even thrive—in rapidly changing business environments.

When COVID-19 struck, many companies were thrown into turmoil as they struggled to adjust to a "new normal." Companies that were already in an agile mindset have had an easier time adjusting to many of the changes they endured, and other companies quickly became more agile to embrace new ways of doing business.

Agile workforces in the business world
What exactly is an agile workforce? Agile workforces are typically made up of small work-teams within an organization. These teams are made up of motivated employees who are focused on sharing data, have diverse skillsets, and tend to be strong communicators and high achievers. The small, focused teams help foster innovation and the ability to change on demand in response to key business drivers.

One of the most recognizable companies in the world that thrives on an agile workforce is Amazon. According to [The Guardian](), Amazon CEO and Founder Jeff Bezos famously has a rule for the company: if more than two pizzas were needed to feed a team, the team was too big. The idea was to make it easier for team members to discuss ideas and communicate more readily and to focus on company values as they planned and completed their work.

Amazon's success at developing their analytics service, AWS, is talked about as a success of agile principles. The creation of the powerful data service came out of Amazon's desire to have teams work independently from each other, meaning Prime Video is separate from Amazon Books. AWS was created so all the data from Amazon could be accessible to any part of the company that would need it.

Another example of agile businesses can be linked directly to [COVID-19](). Think about how much the restaurant business has changed since March 2020. Sit-in restaurants, bars, and breweries all the sudden lost the ability to serve customers in-house. Many establishments were able to quickly pivot to a carryout model. Others were unable to flex in this way. To adjust, restaurants and bars had to quickly reconfigure. They changed their menus, their business plans, and started to deliver or became carryout only businesses.

Make agile work for you
The Amazon concept of having highly focused, independent teams is a trademark of agile workforces. Agile workforces are much more horizontal than the typical vertical waterfall management structures, [according to McKinsey & Company]().

Our research found that the following is helpful in building an agile workforce:

- **Teamwork and collaboration.** Agile teams share data and other information openly and transparently with each other. Brainstorming and providing feedback to team members is a significant part of agile teamwork. According to [Management Study Guide](#), teams that self-manage working on tasks with "a timeline and tangible objectives" can be an effective way to produce results.

- **A desire to learn.** Employees working in an agile organization need to have a thirst for knowledge, and they need to be comfortable learning new things. This is what agile work practices are built on. We found that workers need to be able to try new tasks and feel empowered by their manager and coworkers to complete them.

- **A willingness to try new things.** Employees and managers alike should feel comfortable innovating and trying new ways to complete their work. Agile workforces experiment to make their work better. Businesses should also recognize that if a new process is not working, it's OK to recognize that and try something else.

- **Shared common principles and values.** McKinsey referenced this principle as "strategy." The more buy-in there is for employees to a company's vision, the more likely those employees are to be motivated workers. The culture, core values, and mission need to be well defined and part of the everyday frame of reference within a company

- **Communication.** Employers need to encourage feedback from their employees. Communication and transparency go both ways. If employees feel they are not able to address their concerns with management, they are not working in an agile environment.

Going agile isn't an overnight transition, but developing agile tendencies within an organization can lead to increased productivity along with greater employee and customer satisfaction.

Classroom implications and questions for students:
How could agile work principles apply at school? What would look different?
Reflect on a current or past job. Can you identify agile or waterfall processes at play?
If you were starting a business, what steps would you take to help ensure workforce agility?

Links for further learning:
https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/organizational-and-employee-development/pages/viewpoint-how-to-develop-an-agile-workforce.aspx

https://www.thebalancecareers.com/are-you-ready-for-an-agile-future-1917754

https://www.breathehr.com/blog/8-characteristics-of-an-agile-workforce-and-why-you-should-take-note

https://hbr.org/2016/02/aligning-your-organization-with-an-agile-workforce