Agility²

New research shows the benefits of converting being curious and agile from an individually held skill to an organization-wide habit.



As it wrapped up its performance review process, the executives of a Brazilian bank asked managers a very intriguing question: Which of your direct reports and colleagues would you follow if they were to go start a new bank? Managers consistently identified the same people from the same division. Sure, some executives might worry about losing these folks, but the brass at this bank was focused on the commonalities of such stars. It turned out that all of them were curious and resourceful problem-solvers. In short, they were agile. Importantly, the bank's particular division not only attracted these types of employees, but it also continued to develop and reward agile behaviors once they were hired. "By having this type of talent, they were always ahead of the curve," says Jean-Marc Laouchez, president of the Korn Ferry Institute, who consulted with the bank.

There are thousands of successful leaders, and they demonstrate a nearly limitless assortment of traits, skills, and behaviors. These corporate stars have been studied for decades, and they consistently share the ability and willingness to learn from experience and apply those lessons. But while agility has long been the best predictor of individual success, experts say smart firms are realizing it should become ingrained, as much a part of everyday work life as checking email or getting morning coffee.

Call it "Agility Squared," and the reasons why it matters are becoming increasingly clear. Employees at all levels who have the highest levels of agility get promoted about 20 percent faster than their peers, according to new research from the Korn Ferry Institute. There are big implications for organizations as well.

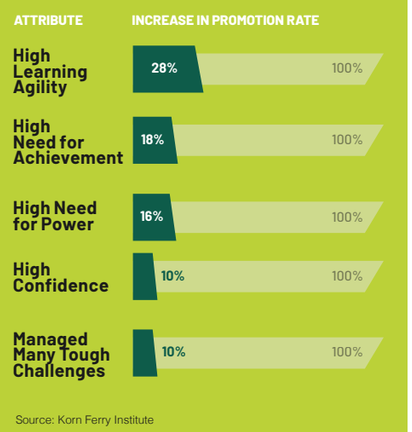
Companies that bake agility into their corporate DNA solve problems faster, often acting well before things become desperate and require sweeping, overly risky transformations. According to various studies, highly agile organizations generate 10 percent more revenue per employee and are 30 percent more profitable than average firms. Peers and rivals notice too. The World's Most Admired Companies, an annual list compiled by *Fortune* and Korn Ferry, is filled primarily with firms with the highest organizational agility levels.

The challenge, for both people and organizations, is to turn what nearly everyone regards as a nice-to-have attribute into an essential, embedded capability, because agility is needed more than ever. More than two in five workers, 43 percent, said they expected significant changes to occur at their company or organization in the next year, according to a survey by the American Psychological Association. AI, aging demographics, geopolitical shifts, and economic upheavals are driving those changes. They aren't going away, either, and they could make the next five years look completely different from the previous fifty. The World Economic Forum estimates that 34 percent of business models and 40 percent of core job skills will change by 2030. Going forward, successful organizations will continually reinvent themselves and adapt to changing market conditions. "You have to have a perpetual readiness for change," says Guangrong Dai, the Korn Ferry Institute's senior director of research.

Organizations, of course, have a tough challenge—how can they turn themselves into agile, free-flowing entities? One way, of course, is to just fill the corporate org chart with employees who are endlessly curious, risk-taking, and mindful. But that's not so easy. In a 2025 Korn Ferry survey of chief human-resources officers, only 48 percent knew how to consistently acquire those kinds of talent. Assess-

Who Becomes a Boss?

There are dozens of attributes that can predict who will move up the corporate ladder. But what helps the most with advancement is high Learning Agility—the ability and willingness to adapt.

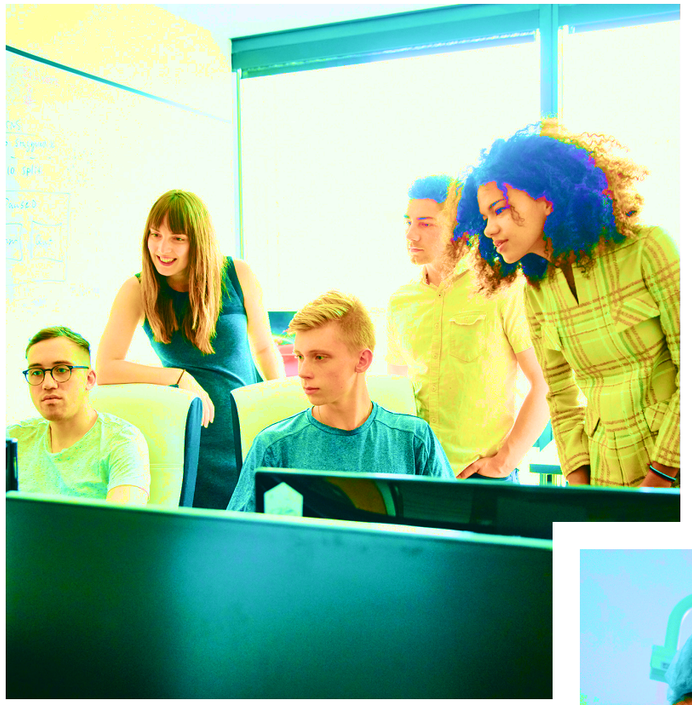


Source: Korn Ferry Institute

ments can help. Indeed, there are straightforward tests recruiters can use to assess a candidate's mental agility in 15 minutes. More sophisticated assessments can delve far deeper, sussing out not only whether someone is agile, but also whether they relish working in uncertain environments, collaborating with others to solve problems, and being nimble. "You want to find people who can create value in ambiguity, learn quickly, and move forward without needing a script," says James Lewis, vice president at the Korn Ferry Institute.

Companies can't rely on hiring, however; there just aren't enough innately highly agile people around. Agile organizations are built on a shared mindset and collective behaviors. Organizations are going to have to not only develop the agility of their employees, but also help make it a permanent aspect of a company's culture. The good news, experts say, is that firms can build agility-enabling habits much like people can, and once formed, those habits don't disappear. "You can move from agility being a random occurrence to a core competence," Dai says.

To create a corporate habit, organizations are going to have to build various routines, an effort that might cause some consternation among corporate leaders who think—with some justification—that routines are things you break to innovate and get out of ruts. But routines, when shaped well, can be powerful allies. The key, Dai says, is to move from rigid rituals to something far more adaptive. These routines are still structured, but they leave moments for learning and adjustment. Importantly, they give people, and teams, the freedom to experiment, share knowledge, and make improvements.



Skeptical leaders can look at hospitals and surgical centers for how these adaptive routines can work in practice, Laouchez says.

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Operating rooms are fast-changing environments where life is often literally on the line. Success depends on the ability of the surgeons, nurses, anesthesiologists, and other attendants to communicate and adapt together. Over the last few years, these clinicians have created a "team huddle" routine, a focused meeting, usually around 15 minutes long, to reflect on a procedure, share information, and plan for improvement. By discussing recent events and anticipating future needs, the team stays alert to changes in patient status, staffing, or available resources. Importantly, the team takes the lessons learned from one operation and can apply them immediately to the next.

Adaptive routines are most powerful when they're enacted at every layer of an organization, Dai says. They don't have to be boring, either. Indeed, these routines are more likely to stick when they're engaging. That can be as simple as giving the routine a catchy name—a weekly status call becomes a "power-up," for instance—or awarding points and badges to make accomplishments feel noticed and celebrated. Most crucially, these routines should be coordinated and mutually reinforced across individuals, teams, and the organization. Leaders should show how their agility routines connect to organizational goals. "The entire organization moves forward together," Dai says.



People—and organizations—that make reflection and adjustment a routine can continuously adapt without feeling overtaxed. Various research findings show that highly agile organizations have higher profit margins and better employee productivity than their peers do. In a world where disruptions are everywhere, that is a potentially huge impact. "In the most successful organizations, change rarely feels dramatic. It feels built into the rhythm of work," Lewis says.

Sharpen Your Own Agility

Nearly anyone can take steps to improve—and showcase—their agility on a routine basis.



Accept challenges. Volunteer for new, unfamiliar, or high-stakes situations.



Learn from failures. Agile employees fail intelligently and don't take failure personally.



Become a better collaborator. Make contributions, but help others feel safe so that they can become better collaborators themselves.



Be curious around AI. Could AI, with your help, devise new ideas and techniques? Maybe. Document your successes and failures, and keep your bosses in the loop.



Take a calculated risk. Present your idea to your boss and ask for some leeway to experiment.