

## **Proof Point**

# **Fast rising talent**

**Highly learning agile people get promoted at double speed**

**One way to gauge how much employees contribute to business performance is to track how quickly they are given roles with more responsibility. New Korn Ferry research finds that highly learning agile people are given promotions twice as often as low learning agile people. Learning agility also accounts for up to 18% of why a person was promoted more frequently than others.**

The leadership shortage confronting so many organizations has made it crucial to identify and hire high potential employees. Part of the problem is a general reliance on less-than-credible indicators of potential: gut instinct, past performance, or some poorly defined criteria.

Learning agility assessment scores, on the other hand, have proven to be a valid predictor of long-term leadership potential. An independent 2012 study using data from a Korn Ferry assessment of learning agility found that those who scored highly were 18 times more likely than low scorers to be identified as high potentials (Dries, Vantilborgh, and Pepermans 2012).

Higher scores on learning agility assessments are associated with many qualities that are desirable in high potentials, including:

- Easily learns new tasks and functions.
- Enjoys and deals well with ambiguity and complexity.
- Doesn't accept the status quo.
- Is reflective and insightful.
- Likes to try new things and different approaches.
- Takes the heat when things fail.

New Korn Ferry research further underscores the value of learning agility assessment: highly learning agile people earn promotions much more quickly.

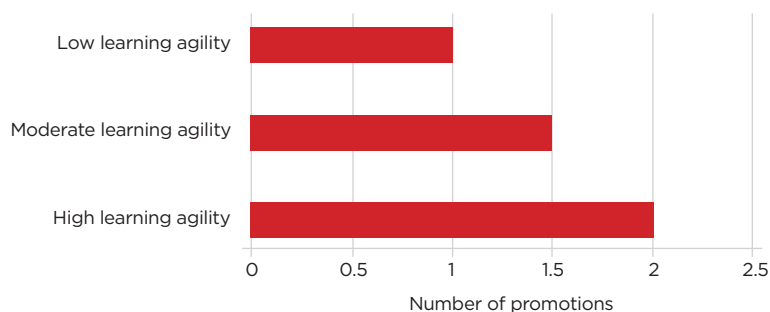
Many factors influence why an individual gets promoted: experiences, skills, opportunities, connections, personality style, education level, gender, motivation, tenure, or plain luck. Korn Ferry undertook research to discern how large a role learning agility plays in rapid promotion.

The first study looked at 83 district managers at a global pharmaceutical company headquartered in North America. When learning agility scores were compared with promotions received during a 10-year period, learning agility accounted for 18% of the rate of promotion (Dai, DeMeuse, and Tang 2013).<sup>1</sup> This finding excludes any influence gender and education levels may have had on promotion rate as these were controlled for in the hierarchical regression analysis.

After grouping individuals by low, moderate, and high learning agility scores, our analysis found that those high in learning agility received twice as many promotions over the 10-year period as those low in learning agility (see Figure 1). At the outset of the study all participants were at the managerial level; doubling one's number of promotions every decade is a substantial difference in a career.

Figure 1

**Number of promotions managers were likely to receive over 10 years.**



A second study focused on 52 leaders at a global hospitality company. This time controlling for tenure and management level through hierarchical regression analysis, learning agility explained 11% of how quickly individuals were promoted.<sup>2</sup>

The implication is significant: organizations that hire highly learning agile individuals will have less difficulty filling top leadership positions because they have high potential talent that can move up faster. And there is no trade-off: 93% of high potentials are also high performers (Corporate Leadership Council 2005), contributing more in every role they hold.

Learning agile individuals are nimble and adaptable in changing environments; they are key players who fill the leadership bench. Their ability to learn from experiences and take on novel challenges sets them apart as high potentials, as evidenced by their speedy career ascent.

<sup>1</sup> R<sup>2</sup> change = .18,  $p < 0.01$

<sup>2</sup> R<sup>2</sup> change = .11,  $p < 0.05$

## References

Corporate Leadership Council. 2005. *Realizing the Full Potential of Rising Talent*. Volume I. Washington, D.C.: Corporate Executive Board.

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The Korn Ferry Institute, our research and analytics arm, was established to share intelligence and expert points of view on talent and leadership. Through studies, books and a quarterly magazine, Briefings, we aim to increase understanding of how strategic talent decisions contribute to competitive advantage, growth and success.

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