



WorkMatters



PERSONAL AGILITY

THE NEW SKILL SET FOR A CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

“

Our mission is to help organizations, leaders and employees adapt and thrive in the changing world of work.

E: info@workmatters.ie

T: +353 01 443 4150

W: workmatters.ie

 [@WorkmattersC](https://twitter.com/WorkmattersC)



About the Author

Kevin Empey is Managing Director of WorkMatters Consulting and has specialised in organization development, leadership development and people strategy for over 25 years. His award-winning research focuses on the practical organizational and human implications concerning the 'future of work'. A leading expert in organizational agility and the changing world of work, Kevin was also the founder of Worklink, an internationally recognised coaching and mentoring organization set up to help unemployed jobseekers into full time employment.



WorkMatters

People and Leadership solutions
for the changing world of work



Contents

Introduction	04
The Role of Agility in the Future of Work	05
The Agility Challenge	07
A Model for Personal Agility	08
The Personal Agility Radar	16
Conclusion	17
References	20

INTRODUCTION



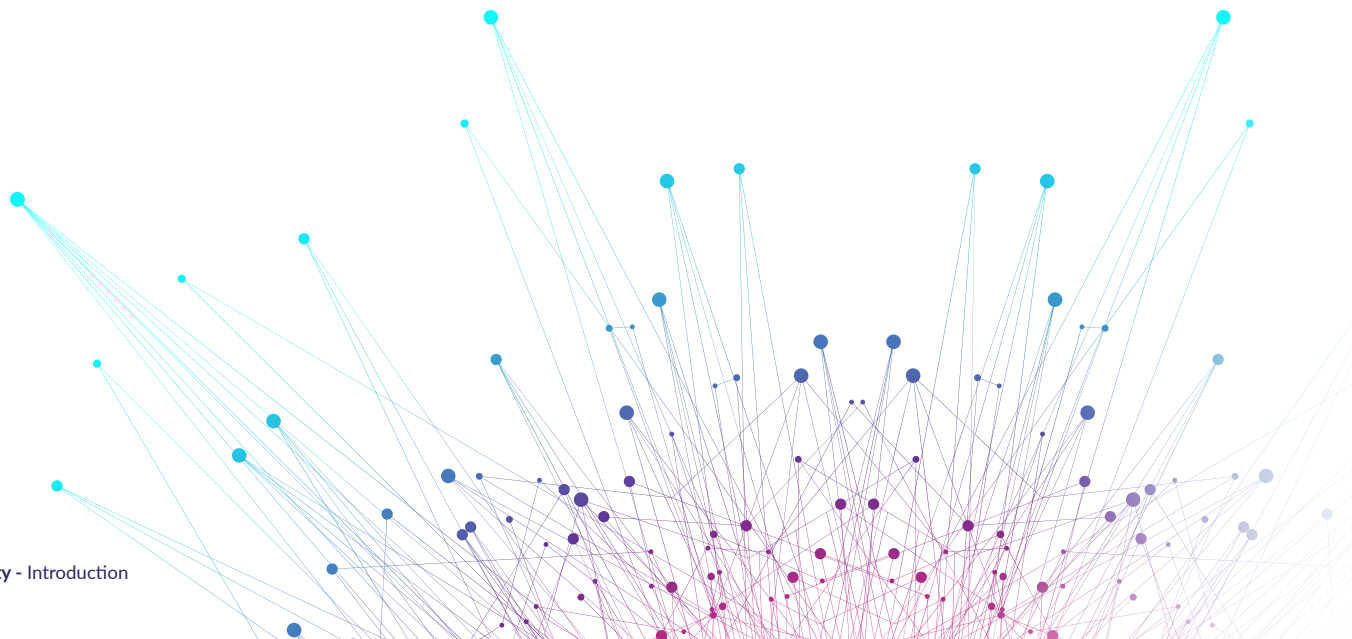
**INDIVIDUALS
ARE EXPECTED
TO ADAPT TO
RAPIDLY CHANGING,
ALWAYS-ON WORK
ENVIRONMENTS
AT AN EVER
INCREASING PACE**

There is a general consensus that the fast-changing and digitally-empowered age we are now entering will see as fundamental a transformation in the world of work, jobs and careers as was last experienced during the first Industrial Revolution.¹ Advances in technology and new options for how work gets done offer great promise and human benefit, but also potential risk and downside in the form of underemployment, inequity and the devaluation of work – perhaps supporting Martin Ford’s argument that “crafting a future that offers broad-based security and prosperity may prove to be the greatest challenge of our time”.²

Individuals are also now expected to perform and adapt to rapidly-changing, always-on work environments at an ever-increasing pace. New employment arrangements and more agile working practices are rapidly evolving across every industry and sector.

But, from an individual’s perspective, what is so different to previous economic and employment cycles of the past? What are the skills that can help employees thrive (rather than just cope) in work today and help them to adapt, be more agile and build careers into the future? From a leadership and HR perspective, what are the skills that organizations need to hire for and develop in the so called ‘future of work’?

Based on academic and field research conducted over a two-year period, this paper positions Personal Agility at the centre of the debate on how individuals can proactively prepare for the ‘future of work’ and for increasingly agile work environments. A Personal Agility competency model and assessment tool is also presented to assist employers in their workforce planning, recruitment and talent management strategies for the future.





THE ROLE OF AGILITY IN THE FUTURE OF WORK

A commonly quoted consequence of the changing world of work is the underlying need for both organisations and individuals to be more agile and adaptable in order to thrive in a fast-changing business and employment environment. Researchers and commentators alike agree that the concept of Agility is the most predominant solution to the problem of dealing with unpredictable, dynamic and constantly changing environments.³ For example, McCann and Selsky have identified Agility at organizational, team and individual level as the most common and necessary quality in dealing with “rapid and turbulent change”.⁴

The relationship between agility and the future of work evident in the literature was also confirmed through WorkMatters research across multiple geographies and industry sectors. Over 90% of the leaders in our field research

‘strongly agreed’ that agility was a critical component in being ‘future of work ready’. The remaining interviewees also ‘agreed’ with the statement but argued that, from organizational perspective, it may not be critical for every individual to be agile, depending on their role and activities in the organisation. For those employees, however, not having an agile mind-set regarding their skills and future career could place them at risk of the impact that automation or redundancy might bring in the future. In short, the link between agility and future of work readiness is clear and compelling for both organizations and individuals.

With roots that can be traced back to the 1930s, agile principles and practices in the workplace context have also developed in more recent years in areas like software design (for example, the *Agile Manifesto* of 2001⁵) and product development. The concept has now extended into

the broader business context, where it is recognised as an organization-wide capability required to respond effectively to market developments, increasing digitalisation and to cope flexibly with unexpected change.⁶

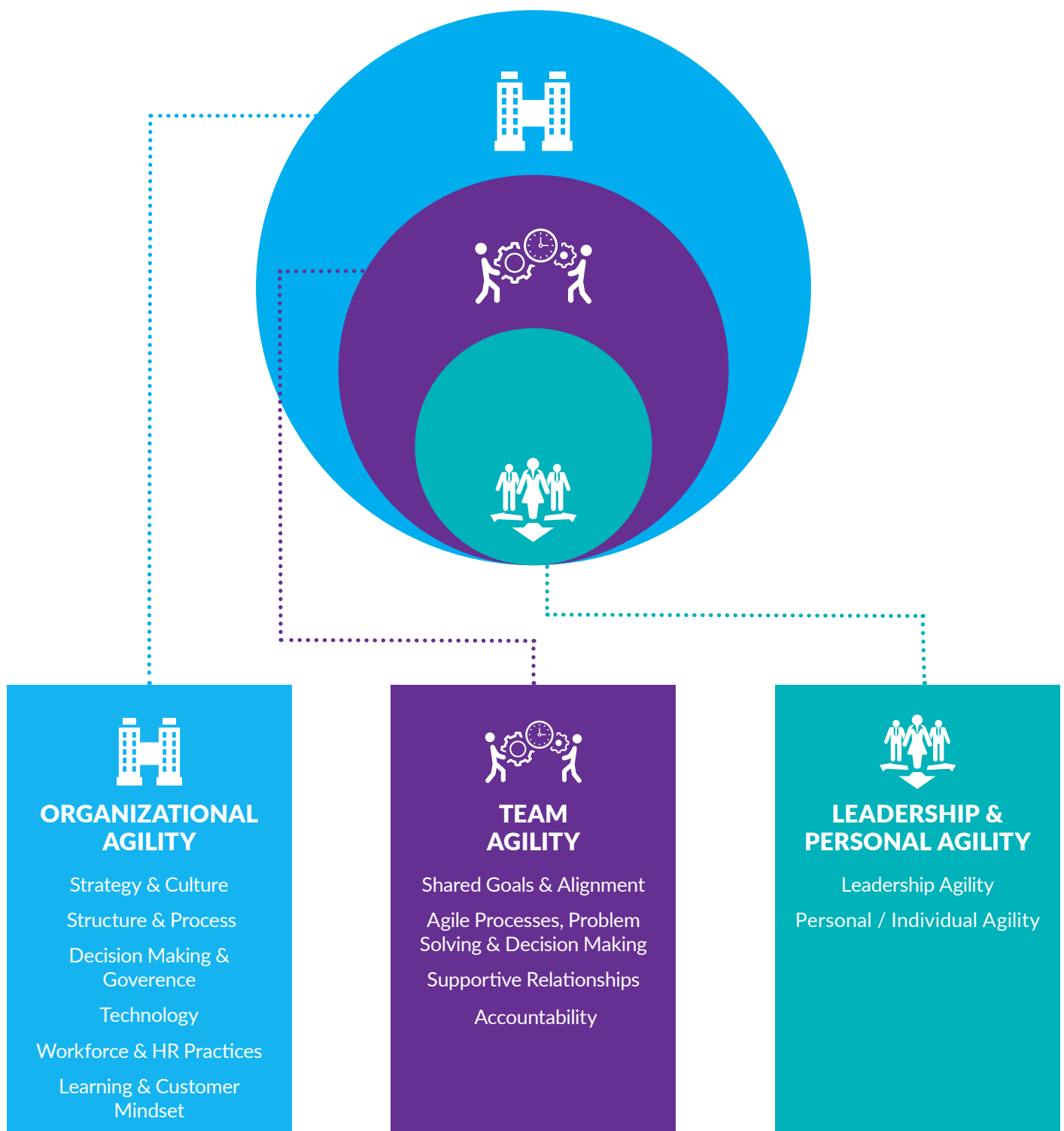
Figure 1 outlines the common influencing factors and levels of organizational agility.



**THE LINK BETWEEN
AGILITY AND FUTURE
OF WORK READINESS
IS CLEAR AND
COMPELLING FOR
BOTH ORGANIZATIONS
AND INDIVIDUALS**

In our research, business leaders typically described concepts such as 'change-ability' and learning orientation as key elements of personal agility and noted the importance of agility being regarded as a conscious discipline rather than a reactive, episodic or 'heroic' trait. Similarly, writers such as Muduli⁷ outline how organizations are now adopting agility as a deliberate strategy and way of working to thrive in an increasingly complex and changing business environment. Others (for example Holbeche⁸ and Wendler,⁹) add that culture, values and leadership are critical influencers of organizational agility. The research underpinned the various influencing factors of agility that clearly work at three distinct levels in an organization.

Figure 1: The Influencing Factors and Three Levels of Organizational Agility



THE AGILITY CHALLENGE

While the case for Agility may be clear, that doesn't necessarily make it easy to practice or implement at organizational or personal level. Agility requires the dual ability to focus on short term delivery while also sensing and responding to changing circumstances.

As a result, most business leaders agreed that, as a deliberate strategy, capability or competency, Agility is often inconsistently defined and unevenly executed. This is hardly surprising given the number of human components and moving parts noted above. Agile transformations often face multiple challenges including cultural, organizational and talent related issues.

There can also be a natural conflict or tension between the practical consequences of agile practices and principles and the more familiar (often successful) ways of working of the past. In terms of leadership attention, more pressing, short-term challenges can remain higher up on the priority list.

However, given the adaptive and future-proofing benefits that come with the agility concept, its prominence on the strategic, organizational and talent agenda is likely to remain and even increase as traditional organizational and work models become even more disrupted into the future.



THERE CAN BE A NATURAL CONFLICT BETWEEN THE PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES OF AGILE PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES AND THE MORE FAMILIAR WAYS OF WORKING OF THE PAST





A MODEL FOR PERSONAL AGILITY



FOR TEAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS TO BE TRULY AGILE, IT FOLLOWS THAT INDIVIDUALS NEED TO KNOW WHAT IT MEANS TO THINK AND ACT IN AN AGILE WAY

For teams and organisations to be truly agile, it follows that individuals within an organisation need to think, act and perform in an agile way. Experts and practitioners alike agree that, in order to achieve and execute organizational agility, one must ultimately also look at agility on a personal level.^{13,14,15}

Therefore, important questions for employees and employers alike are:

- What does an agile skill-set look like at individual level?
- How can such skills be identified and developed?

Personal Agility refers to the qualities and attributes associated with agile performance and effectiveness at *individual* level. The adaptive nature of these skills also makes them highly relevant to future-proofing an individual's skill-set and career as circumstances change over time. Such skills have been clearly evident in the past as humans have successfully adapted from one work cycle to another. However, the pace and scale of change of working life today suggests that these skills need to be spelt out in a more deliberate, conscious and front-of-mind way than ever before. This will help individuals to thrive in today's more agile work environments today and to be more prepared for inevitable changes to their jobs and careers into

the future. Increased awareness of these skills will also help leaders to hire and develop the talent they need as their organizations continue to adapt and change.

WorkMatters has developed a model summarizing these personal agility qualities, based on academic research on workforce agility and through primary research and analysis of demonstrated and validated individual agile behaviour. The field research was carried out through structured interviews with business and HR leaders from a range of organizations involving multiple geographies, sectors, company sizes and covering over 150,000 employees.¹⁶ The work was further validated through interviews with leaders and industry experts on organizational agility from around the world.

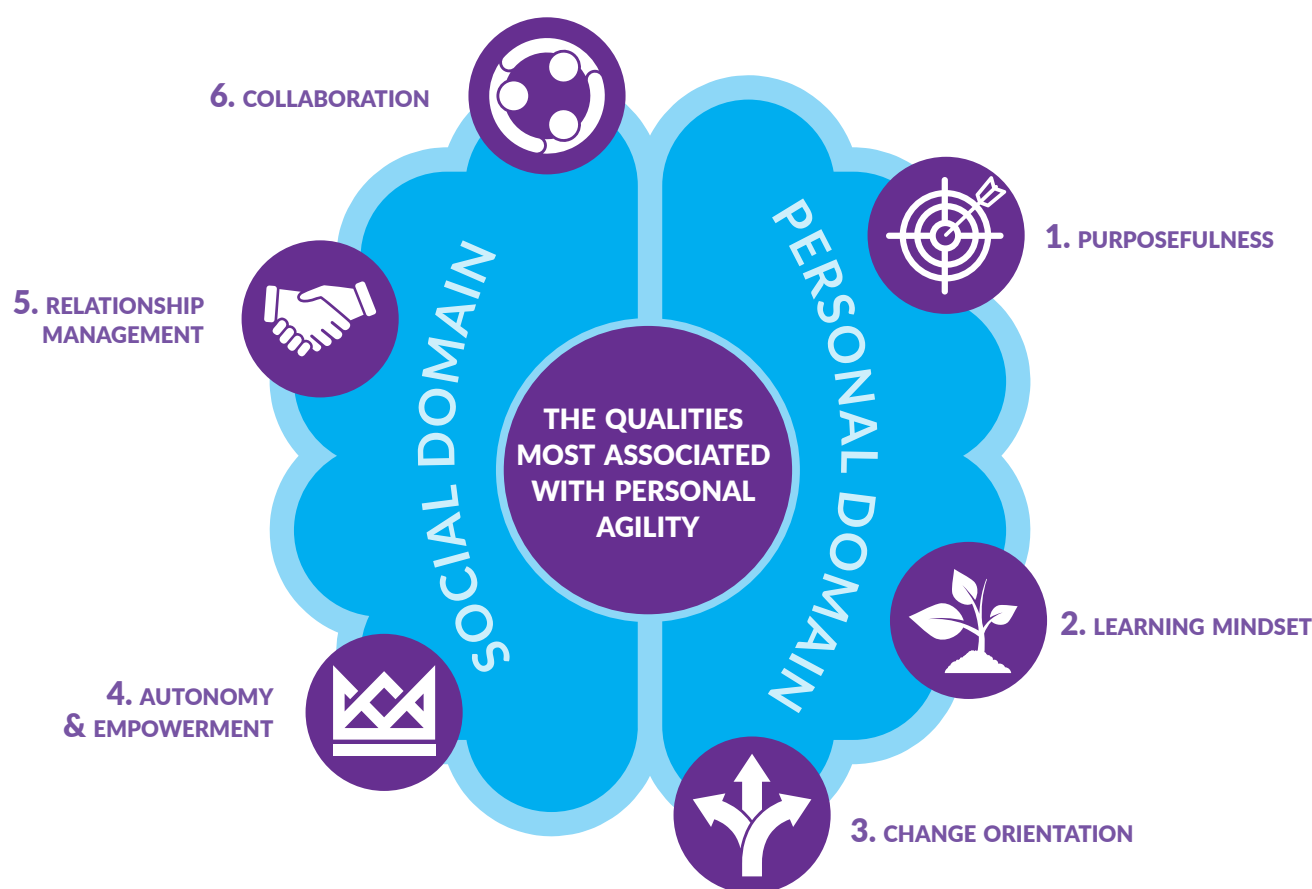
'Our research identified six core dimensions that consistently emerged as the qualities required for individuals to thrive in work today, to be more agile and to build their careers into the future'

The qualities associated with individual agile performance and effectiveness are summarized in **Figure 2**, with further detail on each dimension provided in the following section and in Appendix 1.



THE MODEL TAKES INTO ACCOUNT THE ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH EMPLOYEES WORK AND INTERACT AS WELL AS LOOKING AT THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ATTRIBUTES

Figure 2: The Qualities Most Associated with Personal Agility



Dimensions 1, 2 and 3 (Purposefulness, Learning Mindset and Change Orientation) can be regarded as mainly individual, internal qualities or characteristics (*Personal Domain*), whereas Dimensions 4, 5 and 6 (Autonomy & Empowerment, Relationship Management and Collaborative) incorporate how an individual interacts with their work environment (*Social Domain*).

In looking at personal agility through these research-based dimensions, the model takes into account the environment in which employees work and interact as well as looking at their own individual characteristics and preferences. The model also summarizes the *observable* competencies most associated with each dimension, which are outlined in Appendix 1.

The following sections explain each of the six dimensions in more detail, providing direct quotations from business and HR leaders involved in the field research.



AGILE EMPLOYEES ALWAYS SEEM TO BE MORE GROUNDED BY A SENSE OF WHO THEY ARE AND THEIR OWN VALUES



PURPOSEFULNESS

Purposefulness refers to an outlook, mindset and bias towards taking action with the intent to achieve a particular outcome. Underpinned by a core set of personal values and beliefs, there is strong sense of self-motivation and purpose in taking action towards outcomes for self, others and/or the *organization*. In a work context, there is also the question of alignment between the purpose, vision and actual values of the organisation and the extent to which these are connected to the motivating purpose and values of the *individual*.

Purpose helps to stabilise and sustain focus, attention and behaviour in challenging and rapidly-changing circumstances.

Organisations that are purpose-driven have employees who are more engaged, committed and intrinsically-motivated:¹⁷

“Purpose is one of the most powerful intrinsic motivators because it speaks to both the head (as the compass that guides and aligns behaviours) and the heart.”¹⁸

Furthermore, studies show that organisations with a clear purpose perform better than those whose purpose is not consistent and clear:

“Alignment, clarity, guidance and energy act as fuel to a transformation by providing an emotional connection that inspires greater commitment”.¹⁹



THE WHAT DOESN'T MATTER, UNLESS PEOPLE BUY INTO THE WHY



**YOU HAVE TO BE INQUISITIVE, CURIOUS, DRIVEN
BY THE IDEA OF MAKING CHANGE**



LEARNING MINDSET

Learning Mindset refers to a positive orientation towards learning and an openness to connections, skills, contradictions and perspectives outside one's own current frame of reference, knowledge and experience. Within the context of a continuously changing environment, there is a positive, growth-oriented attitude and mindset towards learning, innovation and experimentation

Learning orientation is also a strategic necessity to *"promote individual self-development within a continuously self-transforming organisation"*.²⁰

The importance of having a learning mindset in adapting to changing circumstances is well documented. Dweck's Growth Mindset approach,²¹ Ulrich's concept of navigating paradox²² and Senge's five disciplines of the learning organization²³ are commonly quoted adaptive learning concepts that are relevant to achieving personal as well as organizational agility .



**BE OPEN; TRY
IT, CHANGE IT,
LEARN, MOVE ON;
A WILLINGNESS TO
TRY ANYTHING -
TO TRY SOMETHING
DIFFERENT THAN
WE HAVE DONE
BEFORE**



**IT IS ABOUT FIRST OF ALL ACCEPTING
CHANGE WILL HAPPEN ON AN ONGOING
BASIS. THEN IT'S ABOUT EMBRACING THAT
CHANGE, TAKING IT ON, ROLLING WITH IT**



**BEING OPEN TO
CHANGE IS KEY.
BUT HEALTHY,
POSITIVE
QUESTIONING
ABOUT 'WHY'
WE ARE DOING
THIS IS ALSO
IMPORTANT**



CHANGE ORIENTATION

Change Orientation refers to the adaptive quality of being able to positively react and adapt to changes in the work environment. An ongoing and necessary quality in a fast-paced, changing world of work, change orientation also needs to come with coping skills such as resilience for it to be a sustainable and positive experience for growth and performance.

A workforce's ability to react and change as well as its capability to recognise and embrace the benefits of change are two key aspects of workforce agility.²⁴ Change is usually the core driver of agility and is an increasingly necessary element of the organizational culture and natural way of working.²⁵ Employers are also paying more attention to the qualities associated with "change-able" employees such as being flexible, engaged and adaptable²⁶

However, the personal challenges encountered with continuous change also highlight the importance of resilience in order to make that change 'habit' sustainable over time.^{27,28}

Resilience describes the quality of being able to bounce back and to deal with the cognitive and physical challenges associated with change. It is also gaining more attention in the management of the health and well-being in today's work environment.

"Resilience helps people to respond to and cope with all changes more efficiently and effectively and to deal with multiple changes without being overwhelmed".²⁹



THE PEOPLE AT THE FRONT LINE KNOW THE CUSTOMERS' PAIN POINTS BEST. GIVE THEM CLEAR DIRECTION AND THEN GET OUT OF THEIR WAY



AUTONOMY & EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment refers to the extent of autonomy allowed or encouraged in taking action and making decisions within the workplace.

The changing nature of the workplace, along with the uncertainties that it brings demands independent, creative, competent and empowered employees. From the employee perspective, empowerment contributes to job satisfaction,³⁰ creativity and intrinsic motivation,³¹ performance³² and organisation commitment.³³

Managing empowerment and autonomy also needs to address the sense of confidence, safety and motivation an employee feels themselves towards taking on delegated tasks with the operational accountability provided or expected in that work environment.

Empowerment, enablement and autonomy as attributes of organizational and individual agility were frequently cited in our field research and are also widely referenced in organizational agility literature.^{34,34,35,36, 37}



CREATING A PERMISSION FOR PEOPLE TO INNOVATE IS KEY. WE'VE BEEN VERY DELIBERATE ABOUT CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS SAFE





**TRUST IS HUGE. IT IS FOUNDATIONAL FOR
EFFECTIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIPS TO EXIST**



**AGILITY REQUIRES
THE ABILITY TO
COMMUNICATE
AND DEAL
WITH OTHERS,
SOMETIMES FROM
WHERE YOU LEAST
EXPECT IT**



RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Relationship Management refers to the ability to purposefully engage with and relate to others, to create networks and to build trust. Rising above personal preferences in order to see the bigger picture, it also includes the ability to embrace constructive conflict with direct and open dialogue, demonstrating interpersonal impact and influence to ultimately achieve superior team learning and outcomes.

Relationship management essentially combines trust, conflict management and networking.³⁸ At the base of any strong and sustainable relationship is trust which emerged from the research as a critical factor for individuals being able to work in a genuinely collaborative and psychologically safe way. The literature also confirms a significant direct link between organizational trust and organizational agility.³⁹

Since the future workplace will increasingly consist of working in cross-cultural teams across different countries, more remote working and working within increasingly diverse workforces, employees must develop relationship management skills and conflict management capabilities in order to succeed. Additionally, networks and linkages (social capital theory) lead to intellectual capital in the organization, which can in turn improve a firm's competitive advantage.⁴⁰



COLLABORATION REALLY HAPPENS WITHIN A TEAM WHEN THERE IS A GENUINE COMMITMENT AMONGST TEAM MEMBERS TO SHARING THEIR KNOWLEDGE AND TO WORKING FOR EACH OTHER



COLLABORATION

Collaboration includes the ability and orientation to work effectively within a team environment. It also explores the inclination to proactively invest in seeking and giving information and insight in order to achieve superior outcomes than is possible when working on one's own.

The importance of effective teamwork and collaboration for organizational agility is prominent in the literature and in practice.^{41,42,43} Teams are the basic unit for task completion in an agile organization and are only as good as the individuals within them.⁴⁴

Information exchange is essential to effectively manage change in organizations and to produce effective team units.⁴⁵ In a 2005 study,⁴⁶ nearly 80 per cent of the senior executives surveyed highlighted that effective collaboration management *“across product, functional and geographic lines was essential for growth”*, yet only 25 per cent described their organizations as ‘effective’ at sharing knowledge across internal and external boundaries.

A clear finding from the research was the emphasis interviewees placed on trust in creating the circumstances for optimal collaboration and a truly safe, learning environment.



**WORK IS
SIMPLY MORE
COLLABORATIVE
IN AN AGILE WORK
ENVIRONMENT ...
YOU HAVE TO
CREATE THE
ENVIRONMENT
FOR TEAMWORKING
TO THRIVE**

THE PERSONAL AGILITY RADAR

Based on the model for Personal Agility outlined in this paper, the Personal Agility Radar (PAR) has been developed as an online tool and questionnaire designed for both self and 360 degree assessment of the key competencies associated with personal agility.

The Personal Agility Radar (PAR) assessment and development platform, developed in partnership with AgilityHealth, provides individuals and organizations with insight into:

- How they can improve their own personal agility today; and
- How they can build their career 'fitness' and adaptiveness into the future.

Figure 3: The Personal Agility Radar

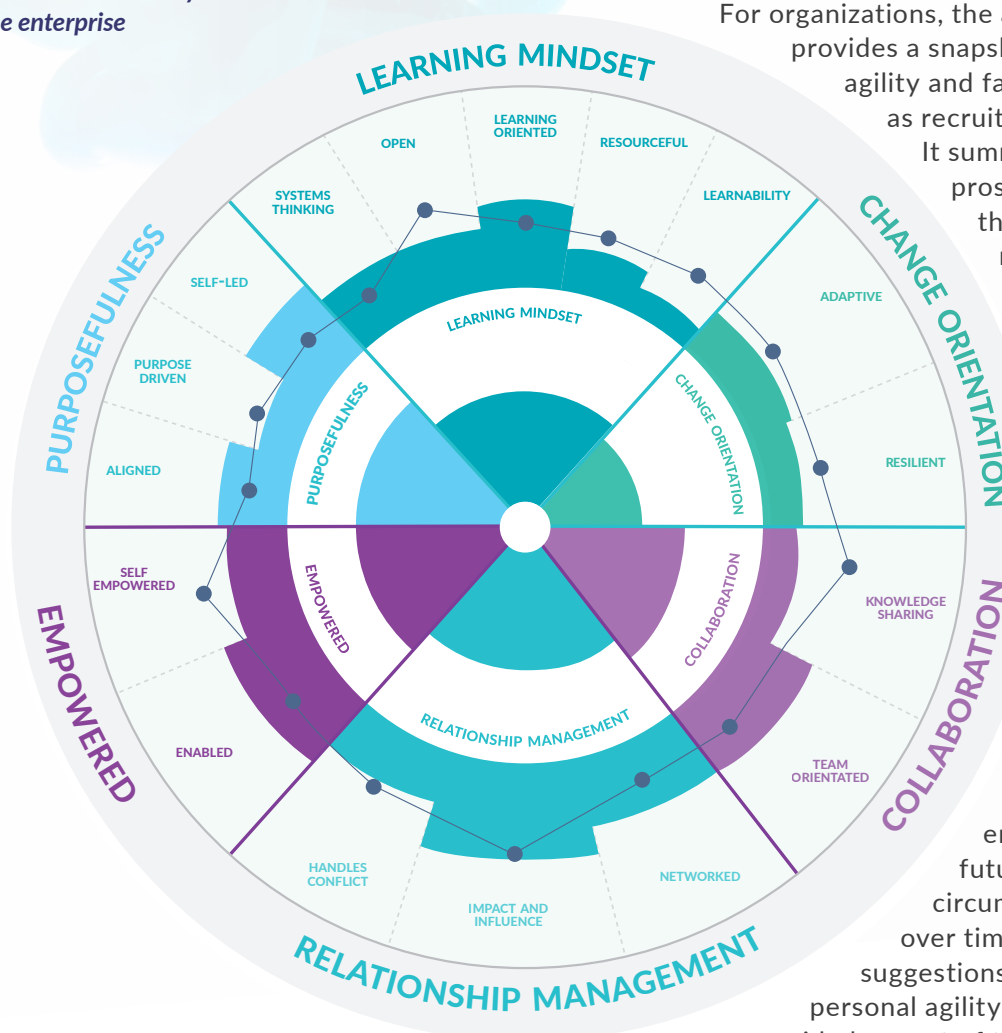
Team or individual scores can be benchmarked locally or across the enterprise

Figure 3 illustrates a sample radar assessment that can be taken at individual and/or team level.

For organizations, the assessment platform provides a snapshot of an individual's personal agility and facilitates processes such as recruitment and development.

It summarizes the skill-set of prospective, future-fit employees that business and HR leaders need to consider if they are to source, develop and retain the workforce and talent they will need to future-proof their organization. Consolidated team agility profiles can also be analysed across the organization and their progress compared over time.

For individual employees, the PAR provides a diagnostic self-assessment of the skills they need to thrive in an agile work environment and also to future-proof their careers as circumstances inevitably change over time. Coaching and development suggestions to improve each of the personal agility competencies are also provided as part of the assessment process.





CONCLUSION

This whitepaper proposes six research-based dimensions of personal agility that capture the individual qualities and attributes associated with agile performance and effectiveness. These agile competencies could be collectively summarized as the ability to 'sense and respond with purpose' or perhaps captured by the following definition:

"The capability to sense, respond and positively adapt to changing circumstances applying purpose, openness and resilience in learning new skills, developing new solutions and delivering positive outcomes with and through others".

This work is intended to contribute to a much-needed conversation around how to help individuals thrive in an increasingly fast-moving and agile work environment today, as well as to consciously prepare and adapt to the changing nature of work and careers of the future.

The Personal Agility Radar provides a mechanism and platform that can help with surfacing and developing the behaviours and skills associated with personal agility. This will assist individuals, leaders and HR professionals to better understand the skills that organisations need to hire for, to develop and to retain in order to succeed in agile work environments and the so-called 'future of work'.



**THE PERSONAL AGILITY
MODEL AND APPROACH
IS INTENDED TO HELP
INDIVIDUALS THRIVE
IN AGILE WORK
ENVIRONMENTS TODAY
AS WELL AS PREPARE
FOR THE INEVITABLE
CHANGES TO THEIR
JOBS AND CAREERS
INTO THE FUTURE**

Appendix 1: The Personal Agility Radar: Dimensions and Competencies



Purposefulness. Purposefulness refers to an outlook, mindset and bias towards taking action with the intent to achieve a particular outcome. Underpinned by a core set of personal values and beliefs, there is strong sense of self-motivation and purpose towards taking action towards outcomes for self, others and/or the organisation. In a work context, there is also the question of alignment between the purpose, vision and actual values of the organisation and the extent to which these are connected to the motivating purpose and values of the individual.

SELF-LED

PURPOSE DRIVEN

ALIGNED



Learning Mindset. Learning mindset refers to a positive orientation towards learning and an openness to connections, skills and perspectives outside one's own current frame of reference, knowledge and experience. Within the context of a continuously changing environment there is a positive, growth-oriented attitude and mindset towards learning, innovation and experimentation.

SYSTEMS THINKING

OPEN

LEARNABILITY

RESOURCEFUL

LEARNING-ORIENTED



Change Orientation. Change Orientation refers to the adaptive quality of being able to positively react and adapt to changes in the environment. An ongoing and necessary quality in a fast paced, changing world of work, change orientation also needs to come with resilience for it to be a sustainable and positive experience for growth and performance. Resilience describes the quality of being able to bounce back and to deal with the cognitive and physical challenges associated with change.

ADAPTIVE

RESILIENT

SOCIAL DOMAIN



Empowered. Empowered refers to the extent of autonomy allowed or encouraged in taking action and decision making within the workplace. In this context it also addresses the sense of confidence, safety and motivation an employee feels towards taking on delegated tasks with the operational accountability provided in that work environment.

SELF-EMPOWERED

ENABLED



Relationship Management. Relationship Management refers to the ability to purposefully engage with and relate to others, to create networks and to build trust. Rising above personal preferences in order to see the bigger picture, it also includes the ability to embrace constructive conflict with direct and open dialogue, demonstrating interpersonal impact and influence to ultimately achieve superior team learning and outcomes.

NETWORKED

HANDLES CONFLICT

IMPACT & INFLUENCE



Collaboration. Collaboration includes the ability and orientation to work effectively within a team environment. It also explores the inclination to proactively invest in seeking and giving information and insight in order to achieve superior outcomes than is possible when working on one's own.

TEAM-ORIENTED

KNOWLEDGE SHARING

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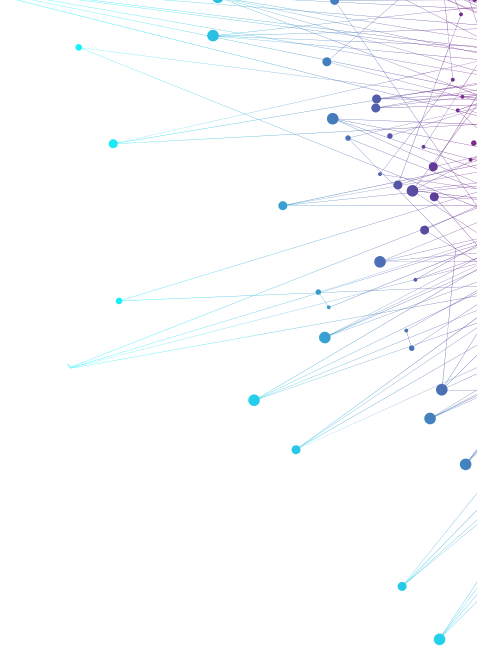
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About WorkMatters

WorkMatters provides innovative people and leadership solutions for the changing world of work. We and our partners provide our clients with consulting and training services to help them succeed in an increasingly complex and fast-moving business environment. Our mission is simply to assist leaders, organizations and employees adapt and thrive in the future of work and the future workplace.



Work Matters

T: +353 01 443 4150

E: info@workmatters.ie

W: workmatters.ie

 [@WorkmattersC](https://twitter.com/WorkmattersC)