

# Developing agile talent

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*Shifting gear on capability development to keep pace with the business agenda*

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# Introduction

**How we develop talent needs a major overhaul.** Many businesses find their established methods simply aren't cutting it anymore. Organisations need talent development that is responsive to very different business needs, and can cope with the uncertainty and pace of today's business environment.

Speed, adaptability, inclusion, and data-driven innovation – are not what most talent management approaches are known for. Until recently, developing talent was about clearly defined pathways and well-established programmes, for exclusive populations. Increasingly though, People / HR functions are under pressure to:



**Match the business agenda** – responding to changing business priorities, at pace.



**Make a meaningful difference to diversity and inclusion** – beyond rhetoric and intent.



**Minimise the risk of losing critical talent** – as markets become more active and competitive.



**Grow/source capabilities needed to succeed** – investing wisely in existing/new employees.



**Offer the best learning products and services** – innovative, cost-effective, accessible, and impactful.

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Drawing on the latest evidence, this article uncovers:



**What is agile** – organisational, team and individual.



**Why developing agile talent is the business agenda.**



**Nine factors that drive an agile talent agenda** - the 'developing agile talent' model.



**Taking stock** - how agile is your current approach?



**What next** – potential actions, further help and resources.



## What is 'agile'?

Traditional approaches to strategy assume a relatively stable world. But, globalisation, new technologies, and greater transparency have combined to upend the business environment. Sustained competitive advantage now stems from four organisational capabilities:

- The ability to read and act on signals of change
- The ability to experiment rapidly and frequently, not only with products and services but also with business models, processes, and strategies
- The ability to manage complex, and deeply connected systems of stakeholders
- The ability to motivate employees and partners

Source: Martin Reeves & Mike Deimler, *Adaptability: The new competitive advantage*, HBR Jul 2011.

'Agile' has been strongly associated with iterative and incremental project management for software development, engineering projects and product design. Business researchers, however, argue the 'agile' approach is increasingly relevant for businesses as a whole.

**But 'agile' is also an adjective, meaning:**

'Able to deal with new situations or changes quickly and successfully'

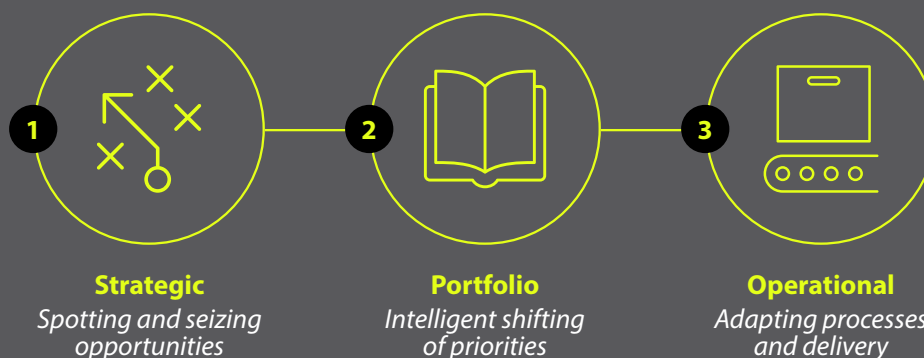
(Cambridge dictionary)

Whilst alignment with Agile methodologies maybe useful, we advocate a wider definition.



At an **organisational level**, agile is a culture, a capability, a set of guiding principles – stretching beyond agile techniques, practices and tools.

McKinsey identified three types of organisational agility:



Successful businesses need to have the capability, skills, processes and tools to be agile across many dimensions.



### At a **team level**, agile is about who, what and how.

Who is on the team matters, how the work is done matters - but how the team works together matters the most.

Google researchers set out to answer, "what makes a team effective at Google?" They were intrigued to discover it was less about who was on the team, and more about how the team worked together. They highlight five critical factors - laid out here in order of importance.

A team culture of psychological safety and dependability are core to team agility. Without it, a team's ability to adapt, take risks, experiment, and learn together is severely hampered.



### At an **individual level**, being an agile learner is critical.

Learning agility has been shown to be a better predictor of future potential than IQ, background or previous experience. A vital capability for anyone wanting to stay relevant and employable.



### **Learning agility is the ability to learn new things and apply that learning in new and different situations.**

Anyone can grow their learning agility, at any age, by experiencing things and taking the time to make sense of what they have learned – individually or with others. New experiences are only part of the story, the learning they gain also needs to be absorbed and applied – an active process.

Agile learners are lifelong, continuous learners who are willing and able to stretch out of their comfort zones. They are encouraged to try new things by their managers, supported to try new things by their organisation, and have the capacity to make sense of what they have learned – by themselves or alongside others.



# Developing agile talent is a **business agenda**

Boosting agility at all three levels – organisational, team and individual – is essential for businesses, teams or individuals to succeed. Developing agility is a commercial and business agenda as much as it's a people agenda.



Shareholders want businesses that can respond to market pressures purposefully.



Customers want products and services that meet their changing needs.



Employees want to work for successful, sustainable and progressive organisations.



Agility is a *'sweet spot'* that matters to everyone.

The people function has a key role in ensuring organisations have the agile talent they need - and developing agile talent is central.

You only attract new talent if you have a compelling reputation for development. You only build strong succession if people are equipped and ready. You only retain talent if people have the chance to grow and use their skills. You only future-proof talent if you respond fully and quickly to emerging challenges.







## Too agile?

**The evidence for developing agile talent is compelling, but can developing agile talent also be a risk? Do you want all your talent to be agile?**

In the world of agile software development, some have expressed concern that Agile is “too often an excuse to avoid careful planning and preparation” (HBR, 2021). Others worry that the short cycles of scrum teamwork can risk teams becoming too tactical or losing sight of the bigger picture. Interestingly, some organisations are shifting to a more hybrid approach – “combining elements of certainty while allowing for cycles of iteration is a good balance of tradition and modern” (Thomas McGrath, Aspira).

In the talent development context, the risk of being too tactical is also a familiar one – with leaders tempted to introduce the ‘latest shiny thing’ hoping it has an impact, but without any real evidence or data to back it up. Similarly, planning is often done but frequently not used. How many times have businesses spent time and money developing succession plans which look great, only to be ignored when a senior vacancy arises.

Many organisations use external talent to increase their agility - with greater reliance on contractors or gig economy workers. Deciding whether to **buy, borrow, build and keep** capabilities is a critical choice for any manager and organisation.

**Strategic talent choices are potentially even more relevant in this context:**

**‘Generalist or specialist’**

**‘Technical or managerial’**

**‘Breadth or depth’**

In reality, organisations usually need both ends of these spectra, so getting the right blend of talent with the right skills and capabilities is key.

**Any business investment comes with risks to manage, and talent development is no different. The trick is to:**

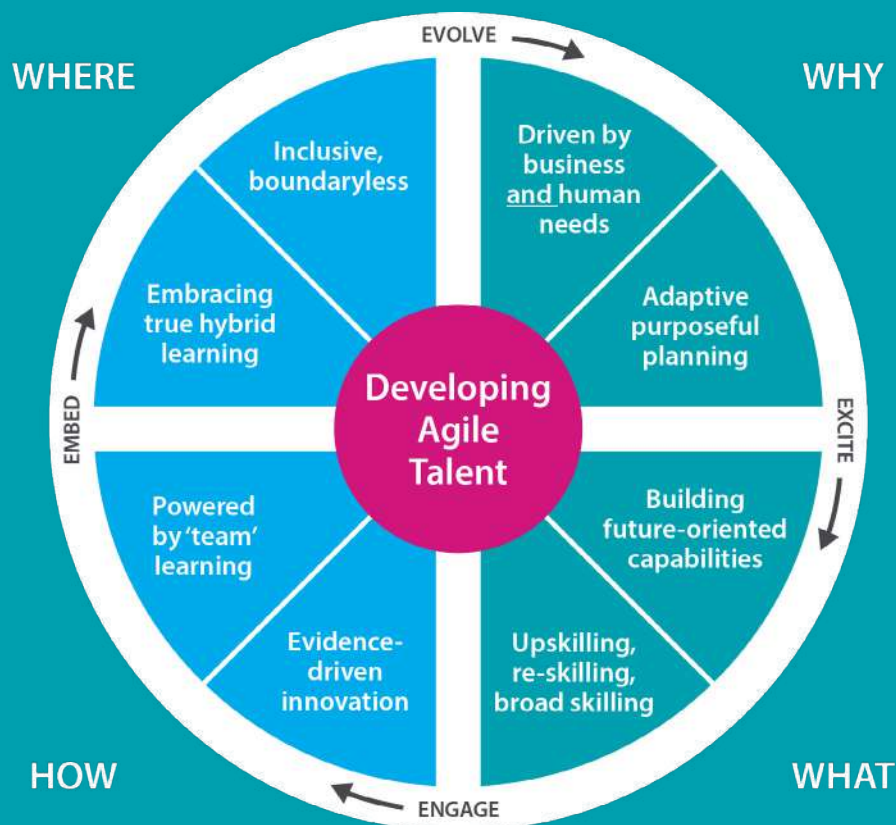
- Build in enough responsive agility – read the market and revisit plans regularly.
- Build in proactive agility – define a compelling talent and career proposition to attract and retain the talent you need internally and externally.
- Make the most of your data – ask challenging questions about it and use it to inform investment decisions.
- Develop an agile career framework to help individuals and managers navigate career choices and change direction more deliberately and easily.

If agility is so critical to business success, what do you need to do to shift how you develop agile talent within your organisation?

## The 'developing agile talent' model - **nine driving factors**

Based on the latest research, there are nine primary factors which drive an agile talent approach. Eight segments plus a guiding philosophy – the 4Es. All nine factors interact and reinforce each other, and of course, evolve over time.

Our 'developing agile talent' model is a wheel – clearly illustrating the iterative and incremental nature of this approach. It is relevant for any business, in any sector.



At the centre, is your definition of 'agile talent' - your vision, your north star. Being outcome and goal focused is key to being agile, as is noticing when it is time to revisit and adapt your direction.

By focusing initially on 'why', you ensure your strategy delivers for all your stakeholders. Planning is adaptive and goal-oriented.

You make informed choices about what you do – prioritising future-oriented needs, and investing in current as well as new talent.

Data drives choices about how learning works best. Learning from and with others is maximised.

Traditional boundaries are challenged, pushed, and reset. Talent development actively champions inclusion, belonging, accessibility and hybrid working. Support is no longer enough.

Agile learning products and services are agile by design. Rigid programmes are replaced by learning journeys that excite, engage, embed and evolve. Technology is leveraged in service of human-centred design – not the other way around.

This approach is very different to traditional talent development approaches so, before we go any further, let's unpack some of the insight that underpins the factors in the model.

## The nine factors – getting to know them better

An agile approach doesn't mean not planning. The first step is to define, and then refine, what your organisation means by agile talent. In practice, this means developing an initial vision/direction and then testing it as you work through the other factors. Revisiting it, testing it, clarifying it, strengthening it.

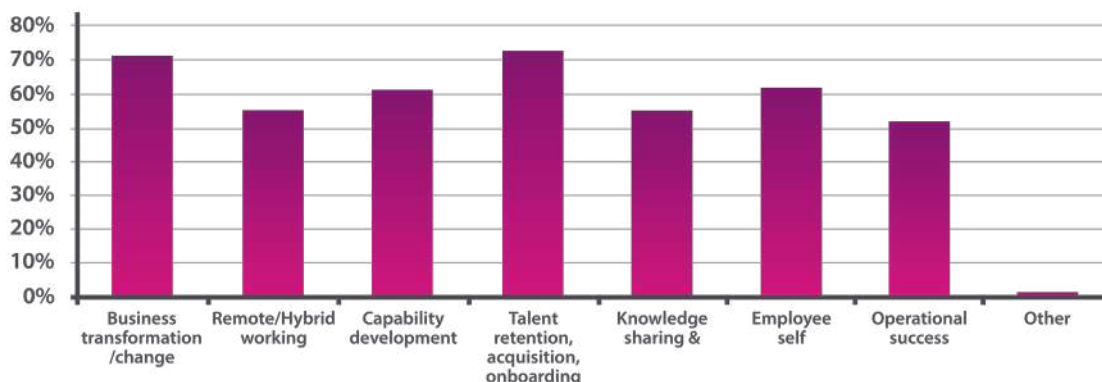
To help you better understand each of the nine factors, we have summarised key insights for each of them.

### 1. Driven by business and human needs

*“Culture eats strategy for breakfast”*

Our 2022 Learning Development Impact survey found the top two drivers of L&D strategy are business transformation/change and talent retention, acquisition, and onboarding.

#### Which of these is driving your learning and development strategy? (Tick all that apply)

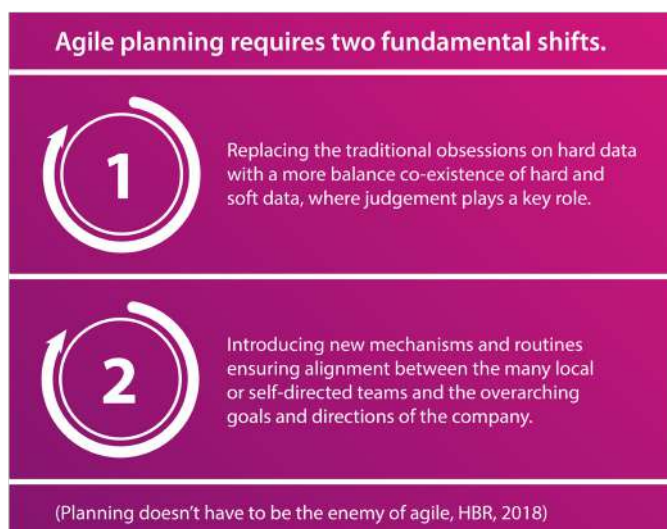




## 2. Adaptive, purposeful planning

*“In the face of relentless technological change, disruptive forces, global competition, and so on, planning seems like pointless wishful thinking. Agile planning is the future” (Di Fiore, HBR 2018)*

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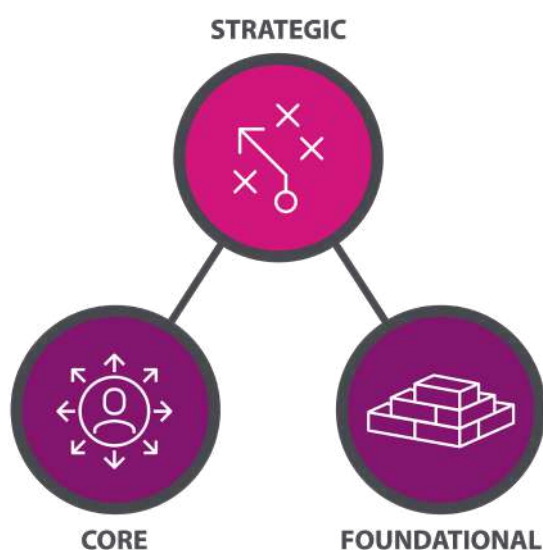
Planning needs to be able to cope with the uncertainty of the business context, but also with the growing expectations of employees and consumers.

A recent survey by LinkedIn revealed that 52% of job seekers wouldn't accept an offer if they didn't agree with a company's mission, values or purpose.

According to Accenture, purpose is now a powerful force helping companies build deeper consumer connections and improve competitiveness.

**As business planning becomes more agile, talent planning should too.**

## 3. Building future-oriented capabilities



*“An organisation's strategic capabilities are what bridges the gap between “great on paper” and great in reality”. (Deloitte)*

There are three types of capabilities – strategic, core and foundational. Sustainable competitive advantage cannot be obtained by focussing on foundational or core capabilities. Strategic capabilities are where the key is, the basis for strategic advantage. (Deloitte)

Many L&D departments waste a lot of resources trying for an accurate assessment of current skills – why – it will be out of date within weeks.

An agile approach is outcome-focused, clearly prioritising key capabilities. Once the direction is defined, you get started, gathering data and re-planning as you go. Assessment of skills levels is minimal (e.g. high, medium, low) and only to prioritise and inform your choice of talent development strategy (buy, borrow, build, keep).

## 4. Upskilling, re-skilling, broad skilling

Many businesses fail to recognise **75%** of their future talent (next 20 years) are already in the workplace. Growing the agility of existing workers is a critical component of agile talent development

- Skills redundancy faster – now 5 years (LBS)
- 50% will need reskilling by 2025 (WEF)
- Fastest growing future skills are 'soft' skills (WEF, HF)
- 75% of businesses are finding it hard to recruit (WEF)
- 2020 saw a huge swing to virtual / blended / bite-size

Deliberately shifting to an agile learning culture is essential – with expectations of continuous learning, targeted support for managers and individuals, and mechanisms to enable lateral movement.



## 5. Evidence-driven innovation

We all know 'pet projects' or the 'latest shiny thing' are common in talent development, but evidence drives agile innovation. What really works – impact, speed, flexibility, ROI, experience, usability.

The secret is having good evidence – qualitative and quantitative – and making the most of your sources.



Getting a decent set of meaningful measures takes time, usually 12-24 months. It helps to get started and expect to evolve.

Good learning providers will partner with you - boosting your evidence and providing innovative products that excite, engage, embed, and evolve.

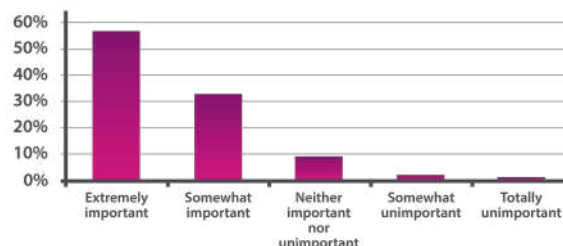
## 6. Powered by 'team' learning

Agile teams learn constantly - in the flow of work. People learn best when they feel safe to take risks, can apply the learning quickly, and learn from others' experiences as well as their own.



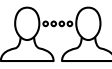



Importantly, under-represented groups benefit even more – boosted legitimacy, belonging and performance.

An agile learning culture is increasingly important.

How important is it to your organisation to build an agile learning culture?



### Examples:

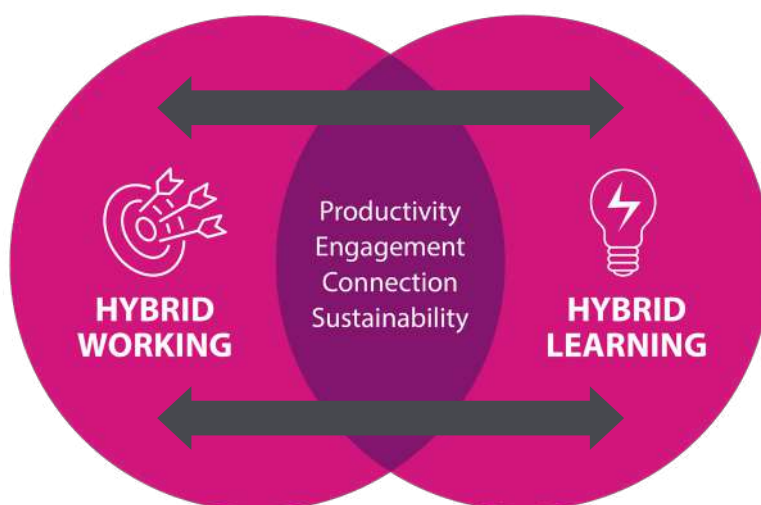
	Group coaching.		Learning sets and learning communities.
	Cohort networks.		Good technology to support scale and reach.
	Peer exchange.		Link learning and comms to drive connection and engagement.

## 7. Embracing true hybrid learning

Hybrid learning is about making the best use of times, spaces, and opportunities to grow skills and capabilities.

### Done well, hybrid learning:

- Is inclusive, accessible, challenges boundaries.
- Empowers development in the flow of work
- Is human-centred, blending methods for impact
- Is enabled by technology, but not driven by it
- Enriches belonging and connection
- Promotes a continuous learning culture

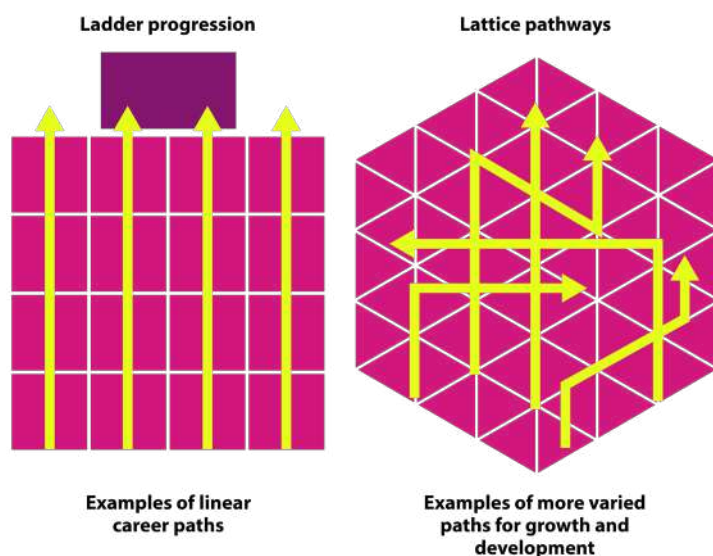


Hybrid learning design is not the same as face-to-face or virtual. You can blend traditionally separate methods for impact e.g. coaching wrapped around learning modules, or uniting programmatic, self-directed, and performance support elements. Digital-first, but not digital-only.

## 8. Inclusive, boundaryless

Agile businesses know diverse teams make 87% better decisions. Everyone is talented, we all have talents. Old boundaries are crossed by teamworking.

Talent development is more open, involving suppliers, contractors and partners. Methods embrace the diversity of style and thinking (e.g. neurodiversity).



Careers are becoming increasingly 'lattice'. 89% of people already say they would consider making a lateral career move with no financial incentive.

Adaptable experience maps can help people navigate their careers – technology enabled or not. Such maps can also reduce bias and shift stereotypes.

## 9. The 4Es – excite, engage, embed, evolve

Agile learning is agile by design. The development process is agile, and so are the learning products and services.

The 4Es capture the essence of agile learning:

**Excite** Ensuring learners are ready. People learn best when they feel safe, open, present, and intrigued – not distracted, overwhelmed, judged.

**Engage** Methods and formats are blended for impact. Interaction and sharing are fostered. Technology supports human-centred design.

**Embed** Applying learning in real time is key through on-the-job reinforcement, practice, peer support.

**Evolve** Great learning evolves as the context and learners do.



Individually, the nine factors in the 'developing agile talent' model are powerful. But together, in a cohesive strategy, they can drive real change for your organisation and your people.





## A strategy – but also a mindset

In addition to strategy, many agile practitioners believe being agile is also a mindset. What is an agile mindset? A consortium of agile practitioners developed this definition. Others, however, point to Dr Carol Dweck's research-based definition of a growth mindset.



**“A growth mindset is an approach to life in which an individual believes that their talents, intelligence, and abilities can be developed further. People with a growth mindset seek opportunities to learn, gain new skills, and enhance their existing skills”.**

Dr Carol Dweck

Both definitions offer insight in the context of developing agile talent. Together they point to organisations, leaders or individuals that:

**Believe in continuous learning, improvement, innovation**

**Actively challenge the status quo by pursuing more value**

**Are open to new and different ways of doing things, skills and capabilities**

**Expect to collaborate and stretch across boundaries**

**“Agile practitioners are said to have an ‘agile mindset’ when they are preoccupied - and sometimes obsessed - with innovating and delivering steadily more customer value, with getting work done in small self-organising teams, and with collaborating together in an interactive network. Such organisations have been shown to have the capacity to adapt rapidly to a quickly shifting marketplace.”**

Denning, Understanding the agile mindset, 2019





# How agile is your approach?

Is your current approach to developing talent sufficiently agile? The developing agile talent wheel can help you reflect on where you are now – as a business, a team, or as an individual.

As we know, agile working is all about bringing together the best people to tackle a piece of work – so, why not begin as you mean to go on. You could bring a diverse group of people together, or gather their perspectives, to help you gain a better snapshot of where you are now.



Here are some **key reflection questions** to get you started...

Organizational	Team	Individual
What does your organization mean by 'agile talent'?	How safe do team members feel to take risks and feel vulnerable?	How do I rate my own agility – past, present and future?
Does our talent strategy address business <u>and</u> employee needs?	What are the top priorities – based on data and what people say	To what extent do I purposefully try new and different experiences?
Are our future capabilities defined, communicated, regularly reviewed?	How well do we up-skill or re-skill – % done in last year, role modelled?	What skills and capabilities will I need to boost my employability?
In what ways does our culture encourage/hinder team learning?	Is our team an importer or exporter of talent? What evidence?	What can I learn from/with others? Who can help me / who can I help?
How well do our learning services champion inclusion (1-10)?	How well are the team using learning to enable hybrid working?	How confident do I feel about navigating my career?

You can also use the wheel itself to help you build a plan to develop your agility. How you do it will depend on the nature and maturity of your business as well as your current approach.

For example, if your business is relatively mature and well developed, you may already have actions in several segments – so your next step could be to adjust or align activities, clarify outcome measures, and dial up focus in a few priority areas. If your business is less mature and developed, you may need to work through all nine factors step-by-step – why, what, how and where.

# Conclusion

## DEVELOPING AGILE TALENT MANIFESTO

Boosting agility is a commercial and business agenda, not just a people agenda.

Most talent is already employed, so developing existing employees, teams, and leaders is core to any agile talent strategy.

Developing agile talent requires agile learning design, evidence-driven innovation, and a focus on 'why', 'how' as well as 'who' and 'what'.

Becoming agile challenges long-held assumptions, offering new risks and opportunities. It is an inclusive agenda – where everyone has talent and is expected to stretch and grow.

## TEN PRINCIPLES OF DEVELOPING AGILE TALENT

- 1) Organisations, teams, and individuals need to grow their agility to survive.
- 2) We only succeed if we can meet the needs of both the organisation and our people.
- 3) Defining future skills and capabilities is more important than assessing current skills.
- 4) We do plan - purposefully, frequently, and responsively.
- 5) Investing wisely involves reskilling, upskilling and broadskilling more than bringing in new talent.
- 6) Real evidence drives our investment decisions – blending data and the human experience.
- 7) Teams that learn together thrive together.
- 8) Hybrid design is not the same as face-to-face or virtual. Digital is first, but not only digital.
- 9) Agile talent is all talent. Everyone has talent, the question is what for, how, when and where.
- 10) All learning must excite, engage, embed and evolve. If it doesn't, it needs re-designing.

## Further help and resources

For further insight, please follow the links to the relevant pages on our website.

[HF 2022 Survey findings](#)

[Hybrid learning Fluidbook](#)

[Future skills paper](#)

## References

[Understanding The Agile Mindset \(forbes.com\)](#)

[Have We Taken Agile Too Far? \(hbr.org\)](#)

[Growth Mindset | Psychology Today](#)

[To Agile or not too Agile, is that the question?! - Aspira](#)

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