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Agility: from a disagilitist perspective

By Dr Chris Andrews

Agility is just another HR fad that enables consultants and consulting companies to take more of your hard-earned money. I just can't see what makes an agile employee any more valuable than a regular flexible employee. Yet there seems to be endless books, articles and conferences for you to pursue your Agile dream.

I recently made the snarky comment: *Agile is just fragile with a dash of hope*. Do we really want Agility when it's a matter involving significant investment, compliance, ethics, morals or legality?

Was contemplating the shift from personnel to human resource management being Agile? In my undergraduate class (circa 1985) a group of intending HR practitioners were discussing the newly found difference between '*personnel*' and '*human resource management*'. In this brave new world we had to be very different in the future. This HRM moniker was ambiguous and uncertain, complex and seemingly fast paced. It was indeed a step-change but it rapidly became the new normal.

Now we talk about VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) as if the future is just too scary to contemplate. In reality, '*personnel*' just transformed itself to be more *dynamic, pro-active* and mindful of how we could *add value* to the organisation.

Ron Carucci (Forbes, June 2017) makes the valuable point that: 'Agility is a valuable skill — but it's still a reactive muscle. It simply enables a faster *reaction to something disruptive*'. Isn't that also what being dynamic implies?

Agile is still spoken about in *transformational* terms by those who spruik its supposed qualities.

At a recent conference, focused on agility, I compiled a related word list.

Agility (not intended to be exhaustive):

accelerated	emerging	move quickly
activate	empowering	nimble
adapt	engaged	orientated
adopt	execution	priority
Agile becomes normal	experiment	radical
(Agile) coaching	focus	refection
(Agile) culture	harmonised	resilience
authentic	impact	smart
autonomous	inclusive	stealthy
candid	individual interactions	strategy with metrics
change	influence	systems thinking
compelling	informed (not data driven)	team thinking
complex	integrated	think quickly
creative	lateral	transform
design thinking	lean	trusting

disruption	measured	understand quickly
diverse	mental agility	visualise
embrace	move easily	

Source: compiled by the author

Who wouldn't want all of that in one small sized package called Agility? Agility is marked by a ready ability to move with *quick easy grace* according to one description. But I find Agility to be a false promise. Let me make the point that I'm not against 'Agility' per se. It's just that it doesn't seem that different, certainly not transformational. What was agile yesterday is just the new normal. As employees we like to think we are special – the reality is that we can all be replaced and many of us wouldn't make the shortlist if our job was advertised. Bernard Salt, a demographer, recently wrote: *'neither you nor I are particularly special and in all probability neither is anyone we know. Think about it: if we're all special, the bar is raised and then no one is special.'*

For me, being agile isn't all it's cracked up to be. It's far too close to the word *flexible* for my liking. Why is that a problem? Because the ultimate in flexibility is 'make-it-up-as-you-go'; at any-one time you could go in any direction. I prefer a concentration on standards with agreed flexibility. Agile may be useful in a bubble but standards with flexibility are enduring.

Take my HR Department. We need to do a lot of repetitive tasks that have to be completed to a standard (accuracy, timeliness, conform to template styles, not provide unwarranted differentiation). Much of this work should be completed by machines and automated workflows. I don't want staff undertaking this work to be Agile, I want them to meet our standards.

In the Agility debates standards are often perceived as being the antithesis of agility

At various times we do evaluate our HR processes and look to improve performance (efficiency, effectiveness and economy). In this context Agility has a role, but a dynamic solution works just as well. In the Agility debates standards are often perceived as being the antithesis of agility. Yet to evaluate performance you need to have standards. My good friend Neil McCormick, co-author of the book 'Lean but Agile', put the agility concept into its proper context. He outlined how a lean organisation could achieve outcomes but should also be concerned to make sure they retained agility. So, the *context* in which we are talking frames the type of agility the organisation needs in order to improve results. To innovators, agility is often more valuable than perfection. Satisfy the first 80 and don't chase the last 20. Speed is a problem for long lived organizations because they've prioritized 'getting it right' over taking risks (Gretczko & Scott 2017).

According to Ash Noah (2017) people, not machines, create agility. It is the combination of technology and the right people coming together that enables organizations to be agile. But it is also the right combination of standards and flexibility that gives more meaning to Agility:

Outlook	Description	Aspect	Comment
Standard	Meeting or exceeding the standard is important	Past and future	A standard is developed in a dynamic way and then held firm until revised
Flexible	Adaptability is important	Future orientated	Characterized by a ready capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements.
Agile	Time line is important	Reactive	Marked by ready ability to move with quick easy grace.

New National Standards released – Leadership & Payroll

The international HR standards field is one characterised by slow progress (many years), a lack of whole-of-topic cohesion and fundamental problems (such as an ill-defined data dictionary, poor outcome specifications and internal inconsistency).

So, it is refreshing to see the South African HR body (SABPP) produce two new national standards, one for Leadership and one covering the Payroll function, in a time frame of months. The latter standard was produced in conjunction with the relevant payroll association. The payroll standard is a solid piece of work that places the payroll system within the context of 'Reward and Recognition'. There is much debate in the literature about whether payroll is, or is not, a HR function. While the activity might sit within finance it is hard to argue that it is not also placed within the sphere of Reward & Recognition. Well done to Marius Meyer, the SABPP CEO.

Standards and/or Agility?

For me there is tremendous scope for HR to move forward through well designed standards. Agility may be more popular but it's a fragile concept. To repeat the question: when should we look to HR standards and not look for HR Agility? When it's a matter involving significant investment, compliance, ethics, morals or legality. All the big issues, really.