Partena
PROFESSIONAL

HR-expertise

Agility

A new reality for HR

1. Introduction

How agile found its way to HR from the IT context

The last three industrial revolutions each had their important impact on the labour market.

The first and second industrial revolutions - with the respective introduction of steam and electricity - came with a change in the work form. They characterised a clear shift from manual work to non-manual work. These two industrial revolutions also had large job-creation effects, although at the time, any change was seen as a threat rather than an opportunity.

With the third revolution - with the arrival of the computer and automation - suddenly entire ranges of tasks were performed autonomously by robots and machines that could perform a particular sequence of actions on their own. An excellent example is automated production in the car industry, where people today carry out completely different tasks than those that Henry Ford had in mind for his assembly line workers.

The fourth industrial revolution taking place today has other peculiarities. For the first time, it is not one type of technology that has a major impact, but a variety of phenomena that are having an impact at the same time. More specifically, we are talking about concepts such as blockchain, artificial intelligence, robotics, internet of things, etc.

On the labour market today we are seeing the major impact of artificial intelligence. Unlike in the past, the intelligent part is also able to take over the intellectual work. In the VUCA (*Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambig*uous) world in which we live, the emphasis is therefore on the employability and learnability of the employees. These two concepts allow employees to remain relevant.

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For the sake of completeness, we will take a closer look at employability and learnability before moving on to ability 2.0, which we label agility. Or how the agile concept is suddenly no longer just IT-related but becomes co-owned by HR.
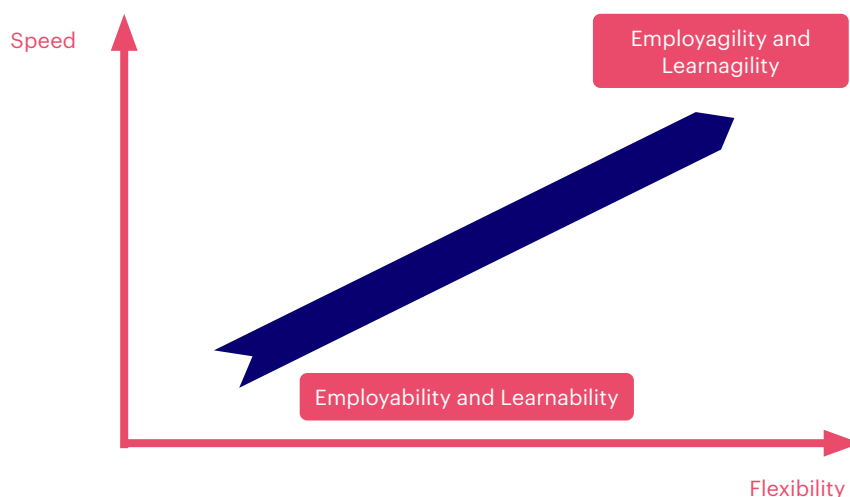
Employability and learnability

The word **employability** is a contraction of the English words employment and ability, which refers to the 'ability' or the 'capacity' to be employed. It is a concept that refers to the optimal deployability of employees and presupposes a development in knowledge and expertise in order to be broadly employable as an employee. In tangible terms, it means that we look at the knowledge and competences acquired in the current position and examine the extent to which this knowledge or competences can be deployed in another context. For example, someone who was an accountant for many years might have the skills to become a financial analyst at a bank. To be employable, the employee uses his adaptability to apply the knowledge and competences already acquired in other environments.

The word **learnability**, analogous to employability is a contraction of the words learning and ability. It is a concept that refers to the 'ability' to grow quickly and to adapt one's own skills in order to remain 'employable' throughout one's career. This mainly concerns the ability, intellectual or otherwise, to acquire and to continue to learn new competences and expand one's knowledge. Whereas in the past the knowledge acquired at school was sufficient to build a career, we are now increasingly turning to further education, further training, lifelong learning, etc. Here, for a long time already, the labour market has required the acquisition of new knowledge in order to remain relevant or to grow within a company. However studies show that an overwhelming 37% of the highly-skilled and 64% of the low-skilled have had no further education or training in the last two years. The capacity may be there, but there is still work to be done in terms of tempo. It is precisely this tempo that is to become crucial in the current labour market setting, because sooner or later artificial intelligence will take over a range of tasks and people will no longer get the opportunity or the ability to learn.

Both concepts therefore focus very strongly on the ability of the employee to learn, on the one hand, and to be employable in other environments (whether similar or not) on the other.

2. Employagility™ and Learnagility™

The road to faster tangible added value

Today we see the impact of the VUCA world with specific, pronounced consequences for our labour market. The composition of our workforce is changing, there is a growing need for flexible competences, the motivation of employees is changing, etc.

In the IT sector, agile and scrum methodologies have been on the rise for several years, allowing project teams to offer an answer to the client's question in a flexible and manoeuvrable manner. We speak of agility, but rather it is the methodology that is important here, in which the focus lies on the incremental development of projects. Step by step - or sprint by sprint - a particular workable component of the total solution is delivered and the necessary moments for reflection are inserted at regular intervals to check whether the project is still heading in the right direction. These moments for reflection provide an opportunity to examine whether there is a need to change direction and whether the objective is still the same as it was at the beginning of the project. The workable component in each intermediate step is significant because it means that the part delivered in the step is already usable for specific parts or stakeholders, meaning that the added value becomes tangible much more quickly.

Faster adjustment to a changing environment

If we apply this agility philosophy to the needs of the labour market and the challenges we face today (transience of knowledge, acquisition of new competences, faster, more flexible, more dynamic, etc.) then we can establish two concepts, i.e. employagility and learnagility. PWC probably made the pun about employagility (PWC, 2015)[1] for reasons of linguistic interest, but conceptually, the interpretation of employagility is much more than just a clever play on words. Employagility is defined as "the awareness and ability of both organisations and employees to respond quickly to changes and thereby to continue to add value".

With a little good will, we thus read employability here and it is enriched with the notion of the tempo at which employees must adjust to a rapidly changing environment. The ETD paths (Education, Training and Development) will become indispensable for employees in order for them to be able to respond to the needs of the labour market. In addition to the impact on employees, employers are also expected to attach importance to this state of affairs. On the one hand, they have to meet the training needs while, on the other hand, they also have to create the environment that can stimulate such methods of working. For example, this can be through the creation of more flexible employment relationships and adaptive employment environments.

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[1] PWC. (2015). Digitisation and robotisation require employagility.

New roles and positions within the organisation

In the continuum of employability to employagility, the focus of HR shifts away from "applying acquired knowledge in a different context". With employagility, HR gets a role in influencing the ability to adjust of employees. Consider, for example, scenarios in which a particular job will completely disappear tomorrow because of automation. The solution of applying the acquired knowledge in a different environment is very transient, given that automation also threatens to apply in that environment as well. In such a scenario there must be the reflex to respond in an agile manner by providing and acquiring new knowledge quickly and flexibly, thus keeping the employee deployable. HR will play a crucial role in defining the new roles and positions within the organisation so that men and machine can work in harmony with each other and reinforce each other.

In this respect, employagility thus refers to the substantive agile nature of individuals and organisations required in order to be able to respond quickly and adequately to a changing environment. In addition to the agile mindset, we can also apply these methods to the way in which knowledge is acquired. More and more often, we are seeing the emergence of knowledge sources that quickly introduce particular knowledge that is useful at the time. In our own world, we are all familiar with the experience of searching for information on Google or YouTube when we are confronted with a particular challenge. In a similar way, for example micro-courses and testing in practice give a new shape to the traditional ways of training. In very short training sessions, a user enriches himself with new knowledge, which he immediately knows how to apply very quickly. In this manner, knowledge and competences are handled more quickly, more dynamically and more flexibly. It is precisely in this that we find the raison d'être for the concept of learnagility.

The transience of newly acquired competences

Where learnability concerns the ability (intellectual or not) to acquire new knowledge and competences in combination with lifelong learning in order to remain relevant, we can also approach this from the point of view of agility. In the changing world, knowledge is also becoming more transient. As a consequence, the speed at which new competences are acquired will increase considerably while, at the same time, the life span of the acquired knowledge will become shorter. In this respect, the Belgian

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labour market can learn something from the Scandinavian model. Research shows that the reorientation time (the time needed to acquire new knowledge and be deployable in a new job) is on average twice shorter in the Scandinavian countries than it is in Flanders. Thus we can note that the speed and flexibility with which new knowledge is acquired is becoming increasingly important. Also note that this is about acquiring a learning mindset rather than concentrating on a school/academic career path in order to build up particular skills. Learnagility focuses on raising awareness of the transience of knowledge and on raising awareness in order to respond to it.

Employees will have to show the mindset and agility to adapt and acquire new knowledge/competences for as long as it is necessary and at the time when it is needed. Since knowledge is transient, people must be aware that the newly acquired knowledge will only be relevant and applicable for a short time. Even more important in this concept is the fact that the agile aspect is not only applicable to the way in which knowledge is acquired: flexible, dynamic, in short sprints, etc. It is predominantly about the agile mindset of the individual that is necessary to continue to learn in this way and to stimulate the hunger for knowledge.

Opportunities instead of threats

As with the agile methodology, the necessary moments for reflection will have to be provided to see whether the knowledge acquired is still relevant. A host of HR tech suppliers are already responding to this need for assessment with applications (mobile or not) that facilitate micro-learning and micro-assessment. In this way, the organisation keeps its finger on the pulse with regard to

whether the necessary competences are still present and whether the required ETD efforts have produced what was intended.

It is important to note that the HR-tech world is not only capitalising on these moments for reflection to check whether the necessary competences are still present. Instead, the HR-tech world will also respond increasingly to the need for on-the-spot training in real time, so that the employee is immediately able to perform particular fast-changing activities.

In his latest publication[1], Professor Porter refers clearly to what he considers to be the only possible way to convert the current workforce to the new high-tech working environment after the fourth industrial revolution. Using augmented reality applications, employees will be assisted in the workplace by technology in, for example, their glasses or headset. Applications already exist whereby a technician wears glasses and a headset that indicate, on the spot, how a copier should be repaired. The projection of GPS information onto the windscreen of the car also ensures that you know, on the spot, without taking your eyes off the road, where you must drive to.

These findings by Professor Porter are based on the same conclusions that lead to the concept of learnagility and are a wonderful response to them. They help to give concrete form to the mindset in which speed, available and transient information, rapid adaptation by the workforce and the workable components are all immediately tangible.

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[1] Why every organisation needs an augmented reality strategy, Harvard business review, Michael E. Porter & James E. Heppelmann.

3. The role of HR

Overall, with such a large impact on the workforce, we see a special opportunity for HR departments. A successful HRM will be able to create and stimulate this learning mindset. It will create a professional environment in which employees' training needs are met in an agile manner and within the relevant knowledge and competence domains. In the VUCA world, each employee has his own personal development plan which states what he can do and what still has to be worked on.

In the labour market of the fourth industrial revolution, this will be a development plan that will have to be continuously adaptable and that will have to follow the fast-changing needs of business as much as possible.

We will work with development plans that are in continuous development themselves and that will be supplemented, changed and adapted at every feedback moment. The employee will learn continuously in a very agile manner. It is the duty of HR - and the expectation of the employee with regard to HR - to pay attention to this aspect. Just as IT & Business reinforce each other in the agile methodology, HR will also have to balance the training needs of the organisation with those of the employee. This requires a broad view of technology and other environments in order to fulfil the development needs. Instead of using the knowledge already acquired in a different environment, knowledge can also be acquired across environments.

Partena Professional Whitepaper

Agility: a new reality for HR

By J. Pollet & B. Papijn

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