

EBOOK

Agility in HR: 4 ways to drive agile ways of working

How HR and People leaders can achieve success in times of rapid change



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“Success today requires the agility and drive to constantly rethink, reinvigorate, react, and reinvent.”

Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft





Overview

Less than one in three HR leaders told us they are organized around speed, agility and adaptability¹

Today's business environment poses serious risk of disruption to organizations all across the world as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Organizations usually have contingency or business continuity plans, creating systems of prevention and recovery to deal with potential threats to a company. However, given the speed, scale and seriousness of such a global threat, business discontinuity is inevitable and consequently, there is the need for organizations to be flexible and to adapt quickly to the unknown and possibly unplanned.

Just 29% of 500 global HR and People leaders told us they were organized for agility in Sage People's recent research report 'The changing face of HR'.

While many HR leaders might not be organized around speed and adaptability today, they agree that agility and flexibility are essential, especially given the current operating environment.

This eBook provides HR and People teams with effective ways to drive agile working, ensuring your workforce is productive and performing at its best, even during times of rapid change.

By understanding what agile really means, you'll be better equipped to implement new and improved ways of working across your organization.

Introduction: defining agile

Traditionally, agile is the ability to move quickly and easily. What does agility really mean for HR? Let's start with some key definitions

Agile principles

Agile is a set of values and principles that have formed the basis of product development methodologies in the tech industry for many years.

It is an iterative, incremental, and collaborative approach which involves breaking the product development work down into small increments, also known as sprints, that are delivered through cross-functional teams, with the end goal being to release features at the end of each cycle.

Another core characteristic of this approach is a short feedback loop between development and the customer. This constant communication and collaboration ensures that the right solution is being built.

The four underpinning core values of agile software development as outlined by the Agile Manifesto are:

- **Individuals and interactions** over processes and tools
- **Working software** over comprehensive documentation
- **Customer collaboration** over contract negotiation
- **Responding to change** over following a plan?

Agile HR vs HR agility

Agile HR is the application of these agile values and principles to HR and business management, such as working in small teams to design and deliver HR initiatives and to respond quickly to customer feedback (i.e. stakeholders and employees) to deliver better ways of working and great employee experiences.

HR agility on the other hand, is more about running HR and the business without necessarily adopting the Agile manifesto in its entirety, but seeking to be quick, nimble, responsive, adaptive, frictionless, and able to flex.

Agile organizations

An agile organization is one that is quick in responding to changes in the marketplace or environment. Agile organizations act as a network of teams operating in rapid learning and fast decision cycles.

The importance of agility in HR

HR needs to provide the same services it's always provided - talent acquisition, performance management, reward and recognition - but in ways that are flexible and responsive to the ongoing changes both internally and externally of the organization.

Think about your current HR initiatives. By driving agile ways of working, HR and People teams can put the employee at the center of design and co-create solutions based on employee input - which is vital for creating all-important workforce experiences in today's world of work.

Thanks to technology like analytics and automation, HR is transitioning from being process-focused to people-focused. As a result, HR and People leaders are influencing their organizations to be more responsive and flexible so they can successfully navigate in uncertain times, which is increasingly important in today's current operating climate.



4 ways HR can drive agile ways of working

Here are four examples how HR can drive more agile ways of working to help business continuity and create a more resilient organization

1



Agile communications

Agility enables teams to open up two-way lines of communication across multiple functions, to help the workforce interact quickly and clearly in response to fast-changing situations, as well as gather feedback to continually evaluate and improve.

2



Agile leadership

Leaders who embrace agility create an environment where teams collaborate, learn from each other, get quick feedback - as well as keeping people engaged, motivated and focused to meet evolving business priorities.

3



Agile workstyles

Creating flexible and agile workstyles is becoming increasingly critical in today's workforce, especially with many more people remote working. New ways of working require different support from the organizations to ensure success.

4



Agile performance management

Adjustments to priorities is essential for the ability to change direction quickly. When business priorities shift due to changes in the market or the economy, company and individual objectives must follow suit. Adopting more agile performance practices helps businesses effectively respond to change.

1. Agile communications

With rapid change in workplaces employees risk feeling overloaded with updates, yet it's vital that communications aren't missed. So how do you make sure your employees continue to engage?

Whether the purpose is to inform employees on the latest news, share new policies, or to ensure safety throughout the organization, the key is to communicate proactively with your workforce in targeted and simplified ways that resonate.

Make it two-way

It's important that employees don't feel that their company is simply talking at them or broadcasting. Employees who feel their voice is heard at work are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work.³

As much as you may use internal channels to communicate to your employees, they should be used in a way that enables your people to respond and communicate back. What you then do with that feedback and input is important; you should act on feedback and openly share activities and processes that are changing, that have resulted from employee input. It's vital to ensure the workforce knows their voice is being heard and input valued.

Consider a news board, pulse surveys, Q&A sessions, and ask questions of your workforce regularly. Are some internal communications channels peer-led? Are your employees empowered to communicate across the business, too? During this unprecedented time, it's important to communicate regularly and often.

Ultimately, if an employee feels that their company is communicating transparently, authentically, acting on feedback, and knows the importance of doing so, then they'll value the information and support.



Adopting an agile communication strategy

To be effective, communications need to be engaging, credible and two-way

Organizations and HR leaders need to:

- Enable employees to access and stay up-to-date with important company communications
- Ensure important employee details, such as emergency contacts, are up to date via employee self service
- Promote work-life balance, share content around juggling work with children, relatives, extended family and pets
- Share information on how to manage absences through sickness and unplanned absences, or what to do if an employee is diagnosed with an illness or virus like COVID-19
- Enable HR teams and managers to change and share the latest company policies reacting to regulatory changes
- Send employees push notifications when important information relevant to them has been shared
- Ensure benefits, health and wellbeing and entitlements documentation are easy to access and well promoted
- Communicate differently with different audiences, and think about targeting your comms based on role e.g. front-line staff will benefit from health and safety guidelines if they are customer facing
- Enable employee feedback to be captured regularly and ask if they're getting the information they need
- Set the tone of communications from the CEO and senior leaders. There should be a correlation between employee communications and organizational plans

Offering information like this to employees through an online portal is becoming increasingly vital, enabling employees to access the information as and when they need to. Similarly, providing targeted and personalized messaging for employees based on their location and other factors is becoming best practice.

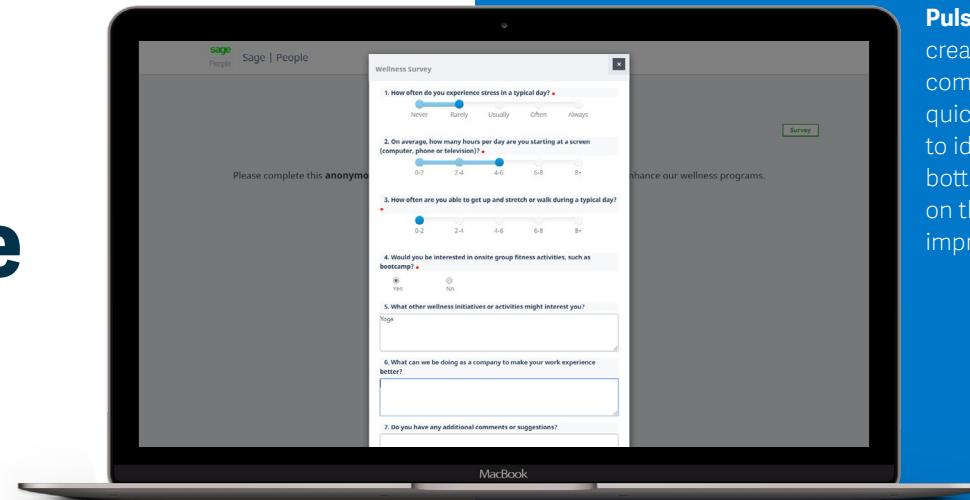


The role of technology in agile communications

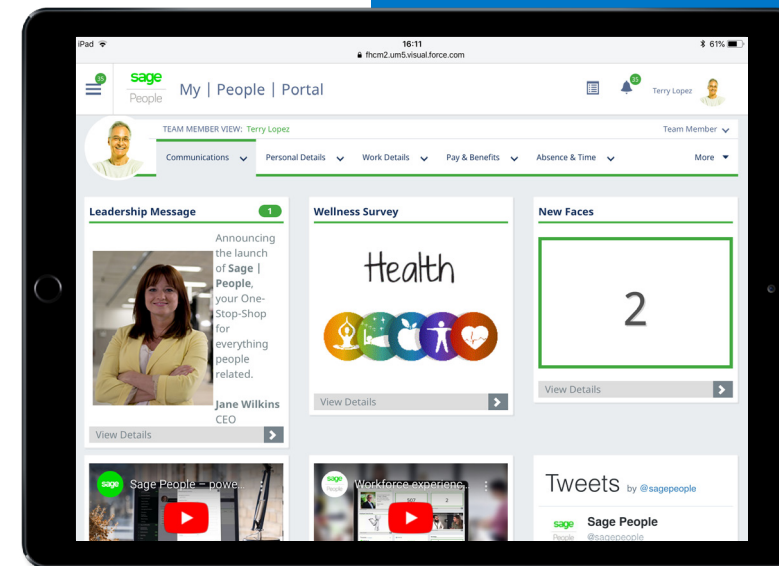
Your HR and People leaders must have a clear sense of what you want to communicate and when. To do that you need to have accurate employee data and the right kind of people-technology in place to ensure communications are being effectively received.

How a global cloud HR and People system can support agile communications:

- Have a **single system of record** regarding employee information
- Enable self-service to **keep information current**, accessible and keep employees connected
- Use a centralized communications portal to automate outreach and **keep employees informed**
- Continually **gather feedback** across all stages of the employment journey using surveys and polls
- Utilize **two-way communication** using continuous conversations, giving employees a voice and managers the ability to listen and respond
- Harness **HR and People analytics** in conjunction with feedback from surveys and continuous conversations to see results that can help determine effective communication delivery and frequency
- **Target communications** to different groups, teams, departments and worker types



Pulse surveys: create two-way communications with quick employee surveys to identify issues or bottlenecks and act on that information to improve processes



Employee portal: a centralized hub for employees to access the latest company and HR information, from any device.

2. Agile leadership

In today's ever-changing business environment, there isn't one management style or technique that works all the time – what's required is an agile approach to stay ahead

HR and People leaders need to be flexible, adaptive, and meet the core needs of the workforce, ensuring their wellbeing and motivation is sustained, while helping them deal with the rapidly changing working environment to drive the business forward.

There's no easy way to navigate through a crisis. People want leaders to inspire a sense of hope and reassurance that together a crisis can be managed. When it comes to agility in leadership its important to understand that change is constant, and that altering tactics based on new information is a leadership strength - rather than a weakness.

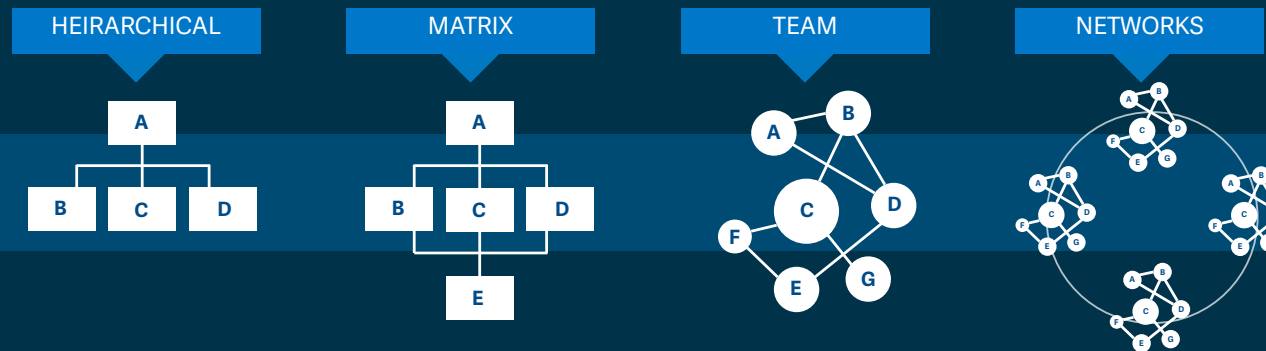
For many organizations, being resilient and growing in today's environment depends on making a fundamental transformation to being more agile. Leaders who have an agile mindset will play a critical role in organizations that want to survive and thrive in today's current operating climate.

Agile leaders need to create an environment where cross-functional teams collaborate, learn from each other, get quick feedback and have the right tools to focus on productivity and continuous learning.

Agile teams work differently from the traditional chain-of-command style leadership approach. The nature of a modern company itself is different, especially when you consider the organizational structure and pattern of its people. Although traditional hierarchical organizations still persist, most organizations get work done through cross-functional teams working together, leading to the notion of blended team networks.

However, its important to note that while more traditional organizations can struggle to respond as quickly as those who operate as a flexible network of teams, that's not to say that they can't move towards more agile ways of working in their existing structures.










The evolution of the agile organization⁴



Leading with agility in mind

When faced with change, successful leaders are flexible enough to adapt

Organizations and HR leaders need to:

-  Strengthen employee engagement, drive motivation and move the organization forward
-  Share a clear sense of purpose and long-term direction to keep employees informed, even in the face of short-term uncertainty
-  Include all employees on company-wide communication that includes work news, successes and wins, and activities to ensure that they still feel part of the organization
-  Create a safe and inclusive working environment where two-way communication and feedback is encouraged
-  Ensure regular manager check-ins and encourage team members to keep in touch with each other as this can be invaluable
-  Transfer and develop talent to address changing business needs, this requires quickly identifying and assigning people to business-critical areas of the organization
-  Empower employees to make decisions and take action, change should be encouraged and enable people to succeed or fail fast, and learn from the experience
-  Remove barriers and break down silos so cross-functional teams have the opportunity to collaborate
-  Set goals and ensure employees are clear on priorities and how goals link back to the organizations objectives

HR and People leaders need to be flexible, adaptive, and meet the core needs of the workforce. By empowering teams and project groups rather than focusing on individual contribution, leaders can nurture agility across the organization.

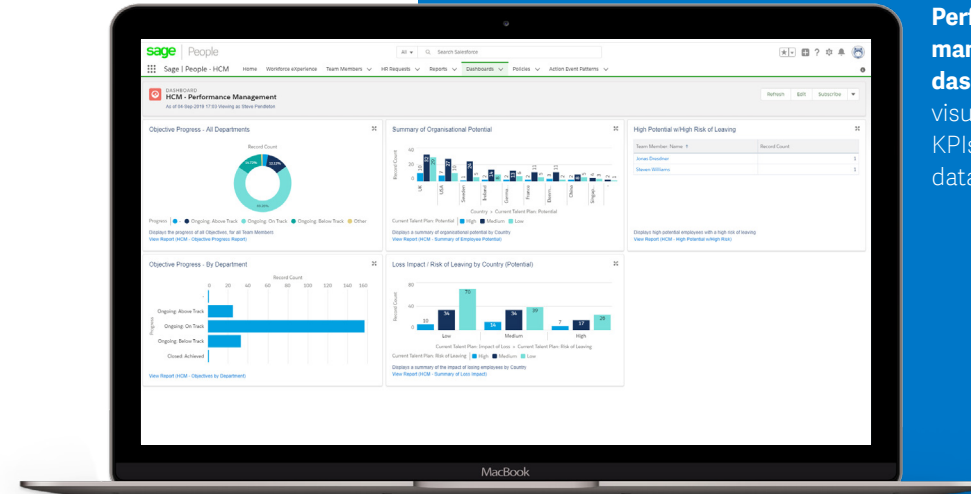


The role of technology in agile leadership

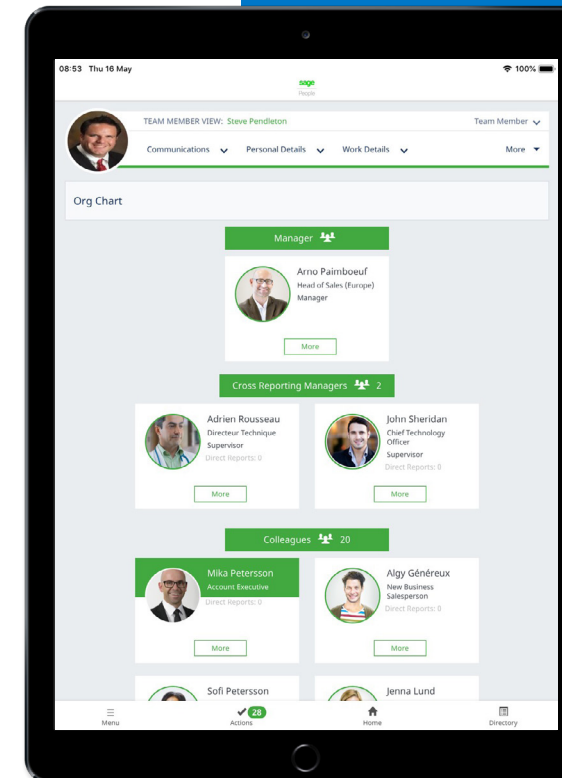
The sponsorship of the shift to agile ways of working by senior leaders within the organization is paramount to success as they provide the support, resources, and tools for teams to adopt agile ways of working. While leadership sponsorship and buy-in is crucial for success, the most important thing is the people - bringing together a team of employees who can work collaboratively and at speed.

How a global cloud HR and People system can support agile leadership:

- Use a **centralized communications portal** to share core values, objectives and priorities, as well as the latest company news
- A clear, consolidated **cross-team, multi-location view** gives leaders an overview of your workforce comprising of people from a range of business areas
- See groups and teams in a team calendar view for **better visibility** of their availability, enabling cross functional working groups
- Customize **dashboards for different managers** and functions, so they are updated on matters that are important to them
- The ability to make **fast and confident decisions**, that's backed by up to the minute data and actionable insights
- Leadership sets **broad strategic direction**, from which teams can set their **own objectives**, reiterating at pace
- Recognize employees that go above and beyond with **instant feedback** and tie that back into financial and other rewards



Performance management dashboard: visualize performance KPIs and strategic data in one place



Dynamic org charts: search for all colleagues via a people directory, show customizable records and cross-functional teams' structures

4. Agile workstyles

Work is an activity we do, rather than a place we go

Workstyles that are both flexible and agile are important for an inclusive and productive working environment in today's world of work. Agile workstyles generally give flexibility over where, when and the hours people do their job.

There are different ways of working flexibly including; job sharing, part-time, compressed hours, flexitime, working from home, contingent working and more.

Flexible working – especially flexible start and finish times and remote working – has become ingrained in many progressive organizations in the past few years, as technology has enabled people to keep connected without being stuck in an office environment. More recently, this has become an imperative, not an option or benefit as it once was.

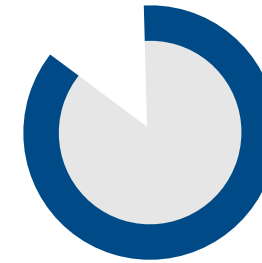
While new ways of working are being adopted constantly and working from home has now become a new reality for millions of people, agile workstyles is about enabling organizations to focus more closely on the way their people work and what it needs to support them.

A study by the International Workplace Group (IWG) revealed that there has been a major shift toward the employee, endorsing that they now have more input on how and where they work. According to IWG's study of over 15,000 business people, 80% said when faced with two similar employment offers, they would turn down the one that didn't offer flexible working.⁵

Agile workstyles has been shown not only to boost productivity and enhance workforce wellbeing, it's also proved to increase employee retention rates.

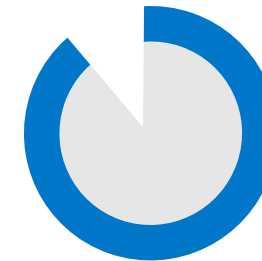
Most importantly, it's what employees expect and need.

80%



of U.S. workers say they would turn down a job that didn't offer flexible working⁵

85%



also confirm that productivity has increased in their business as a result of greater flexibility⁵

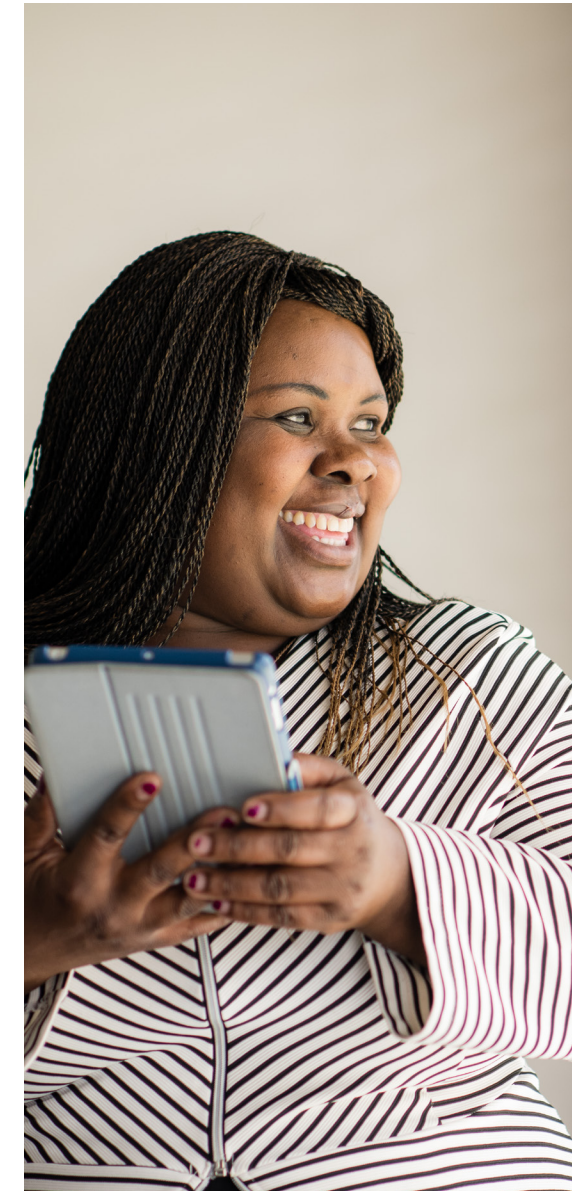
Offering agile and flexible workstyles

To offer effective agile workstyles you need to have the tools and processes in place to support remote working and alternative contracts

Organizations and HR leaders need to:

- Encourage flexible working, ensuring line managers are properly equipped to help employees work flexibly
- Raise awareness of different forms of flexible working, such as compressed hours, flexitime, and job sharing
- Offer employee self-serve capabilities so your workforce is empowered with the tools to keep up-to-date and answer questions themselves
- Make use of the latest electronic instant messaging and video conferencing tools, including webcams
- Don't lose sight that people still need to work as part of a team and regular meetings should involve everyone
- Create a team calendar that is visible and accessible electronically, everyone is then aware of who is off and who can be contacted
- Set different working policies to ensure employees know what's expected of them in terms of work hours, targets, meeting times, and methods of collaboration
- Regularly get feedback, it's important to resolve issues quickly especially if it's preventing employees from working effectively
- Track productivity and wellbeing of employees so you can share if flexible workstyles are working for your organization
- Encourage managers to work flexibly themselves, so they act as role models

With its many benefits, agile workstyles should be the norm - not the exception. As HR and People teams drive their organizations toward agile ways of working this is an opportunity for employers to do more to provide flexibility and diversity.

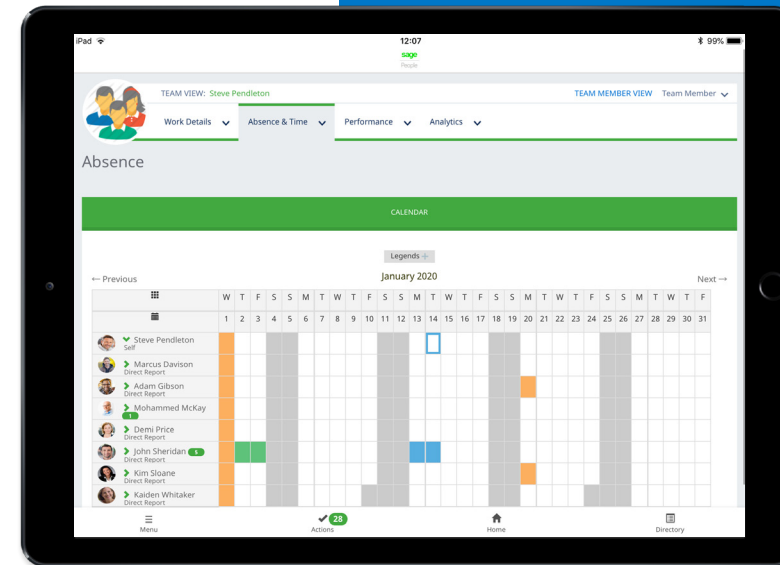


The role of technology in agile workstyles

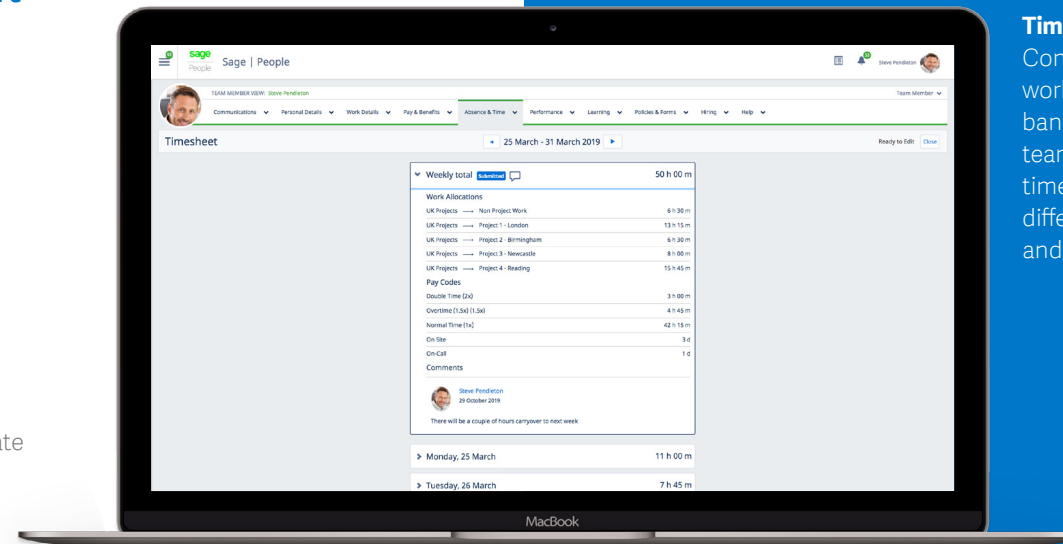
To ensure agile workstyles are successful HR leaders need to develop mutual trust between senior management teams, people managers and employees in different ways of working. It's important to support these ways of working with an appropriate people management system.

How a global cloud HR and People system can support agile workstyles:

- Enable your employees to **connect from any location** and from any device, with 24/7 access to a self-service portal
- Empower your people to access their key pay information, book leave and manage requests flexibly, **on the go**, at home or elsewhere
- Communicate **critical business updates** and help employees access time critical videos, social updates and news in one place for urgent communication
- Quickly provide **targeted communications** to specific employee groups with information relating to their role or situation; improving engagement and responses
- Use surveys to create **two-way communications** and provide immediate feedback from employees, helping to identify issues or bottlenecks
- Employees can also use **groups and teams functionality** to manage project and cross functional teams, enabling specific communication and viewing planned holidays for members



Team calendar view: see team schedules at a glance so it's easy to see who is absent or available to work



Timesheets: Control the workload and bandwidth of your team with efficient time tracking for different roles and teams

Agile performance management

The world of work is changing at pace, is your performance management process keeping up?

One of the top drivers for employee engagement and productivity is seeing their work contribute to company goals. According to Gallup's research on re-engineering performance management, only 30% of employees strongly agreed that their manager involves them in goal setting. Employees whose managers involve them in goal setting are 3.6 times more likely to be engaged than employees who aren't involved.⁶

Working flexibly shouldn't make a difference in how you and your employees set goals, or how they are rewarded or praised for tasks done well, completed on time, or even ahead of schedule. Equally, it's important to recognize when goals aren't being met so you can understand the reason and assess if further support to those employees is needed so they do not feel isolated.

As companies move to more agile ways of working and agile workstyles, individuals work on shorter-term projects of various lengths, often run by different leaders and organized around cross-functional teams. The notion that performance feedback then would happen annually, from one line manager, is no longer sufficient for business success. Employees need more coaching, more often, from more people both inside and possibly outside the business.

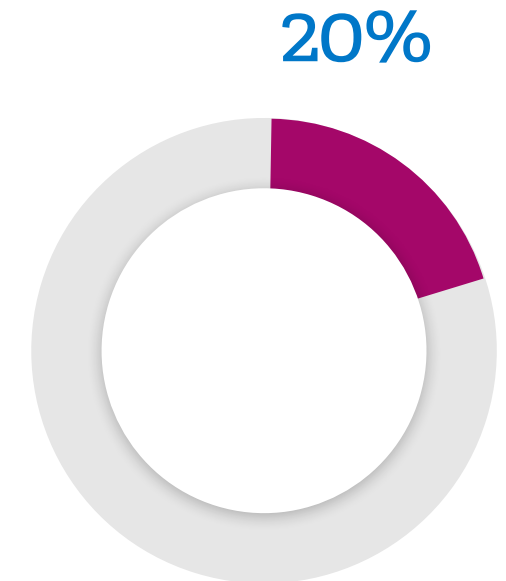
It's important to think about agile performance management from two angles:

- 1) continuous employee development combined with,
- 2) continuous conversations

This shift in focus from traditional performance management recognizes that a more skilled and capable workforce can perform better and boost company performance. Just like an Olympic team, regular feedback, communication and coaching is needed to create excellent performance to be highly competitive in today's rapidly changing business environment.

In order to support employees and drive performance outcomes even in times of rapid change, HR and People leaders must encourage managers and employees to adapt their conversations and processes.

Only 20% of employees strongly agree that their company's performance review system motivates them⁷



Embracing agility in performance management

Agile performance management enables HR and People teams to create enthusiasm and engagement through continuous conversations and coaching

HR and People teams to develop and grow their workforce by:



Using objectives to provide clarity on individual goals and their direct link to the overall business goals, even in challenging business environments



Rewarding employees for their great work with tokens of appreciation, development opportunities and low-cost perks



Reinforcing the organization's commitment to the long-term success of the employee, even in the face of constraints on new investments, resources or pay



Encouraging innovation, even when the organization has budget constraints, managers can emphasize the need for incremental innovation or process improvements



Continually develop and expand skills and talent pools among existing employees to address the markets' changing needs



Using continuous conversations to enable a two-way dialogue that focuses on both the positive and negative implications of business conditions

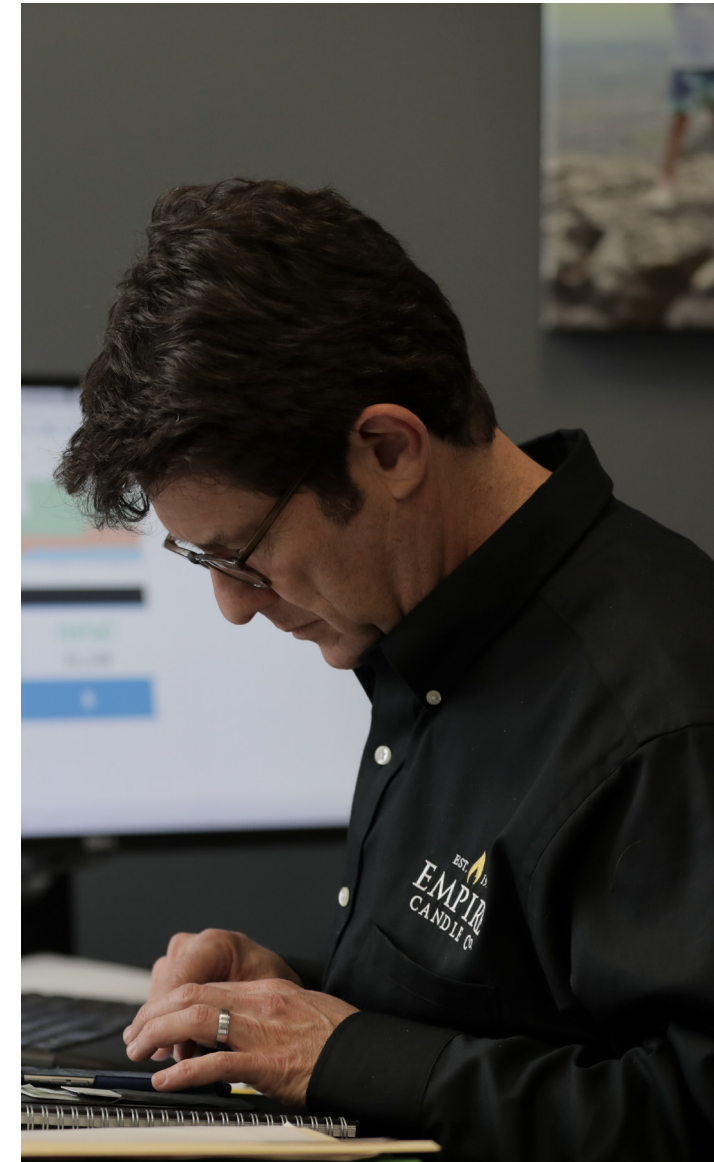


Tailoring acknowledgment of employee efforts, especially when employees go the 'extra mile' to avoid disruption for customers



Creating end-to-end accountability over projects and responsibilities to support cross-functional teams and agile ways of working

Traditional performance management processes and systems have struggled to motivate and develop employees because their approach led to infrequent and ineffective feedback, resulting in unfair employee evaluation with misplaced accountability.

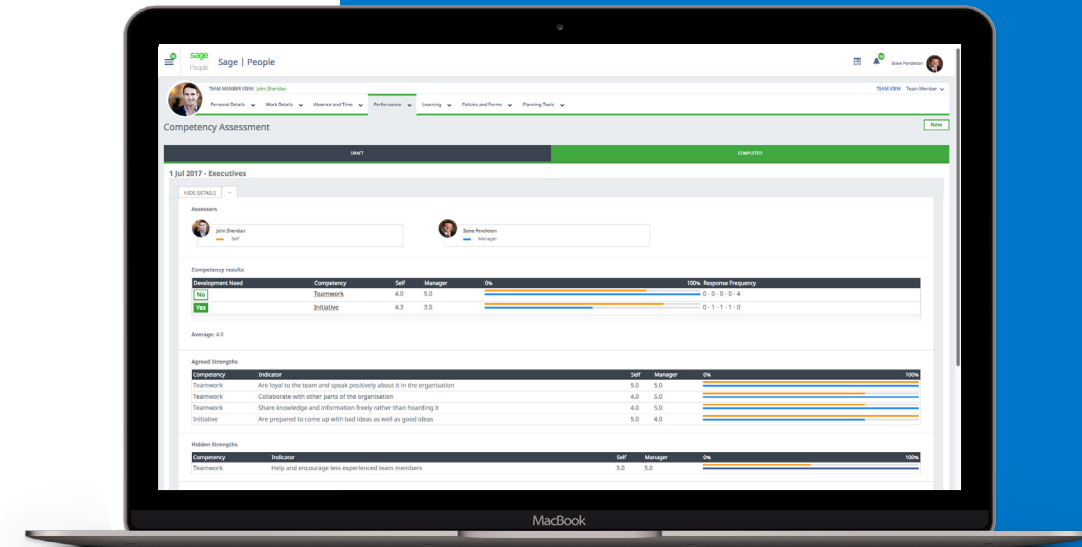


The role of technology in agile performance management

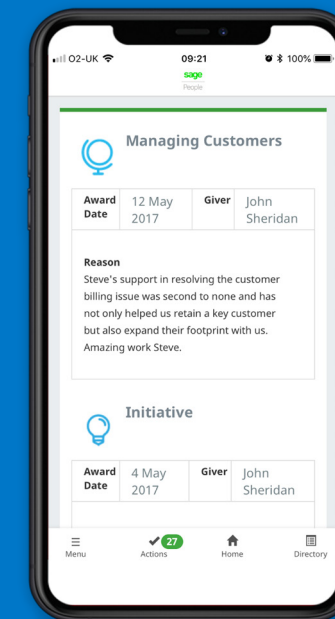
Agile performance management needs to support cross-functional teams, project work, changing needs and use feedback to improve growth. The right HR system can help manage your people's development with continuous conversations and goals setting.

How a global cloud HR and People system can support agile performance management:

- Enable open discussions and **continuous conversation** between managers and colleagues to improve and enhance performance
- Update **objectives in real time** as they evolve, rather than waiting until the end of a financial year when they may have become out of date
- Align and **track performance regularly** against individual goals, linking them to the organization's objectives
- Enable 360 feedback through internal team members as well as external assessors **outside of annual or other formal periodic reviews**
- Easily **search for skills and capabilities** across your global workforce for job role matching or bridging skills gaps
- Create career and professional development plans as part of your employee performance management process **whenever you identify a learning need**
- Succession plan in real time with an **accurate and up to date** view of multiple successors, level of readiness and supporting development plans



Competency assessment: identify and understand development needs and track ongoing feedback



Recognition: celebrate individual employee performance with instant feedback and recognition based awards

Conclusion: how to implement agile ways of working

By adopting more agile and flexible ways of working in HR and across your organization, you will be much better prepared to react to market, business or economic changes, and be more resilient as a business as a result

Agility in HR means your HR and People teams become faster, slicker, more responsive and flexible to support the business through times of change, while also supporting more agile ways of working across the organization.

This will result in confidence across the business as a whole; with leaders, employees and customers alike reassured that the organization is resilient, and well equipped to respond when faced with uncertainty.

By following these four examples of how HR and People teams can drive more agile ways of working and adapt to the current business environment, while using technology to transform digitally, you can keep your workforce functioning effectively and drive better business outcomes.

The benefits of agility in HR and driving agile ways of working include:

- **Enabling business resilience** by being ready and able to flex business priorities in response to unpredictable events or market changes
- **Improving engagement** with regular feedback while important communications keeps employees informed about how they are performing, improving transparency.
- **Sustaining performance** through continuous conversations rather than annual reviews so teams can adapt quickly to new business priorities
- **Encouraging collaboration** by enabling cross-functional teams to work more effectively together, delivering impact to the business faster



Links to all sources

- 1. The changing face of HR**
Sage People
- 2. Agile Manifesto**
- 3. The Impact of Equality and Values Driven Business**
Salesforce
- 4. The organization of the future: Arriving now**
Deloitte
- 5. Welcome to Generation Flex – the employee power shift**
International Workplace Group
- 6. Re-engineering performance management**
Gallup
- 7. Agile organization models are going mainstream**
Josh Bersin



