



# Learning Agility and HR

How learning agile is HR in South Africa?

 **HFM TALENTINDEX**  
Online Assessment

This **Learning Agility in HR South Africa research** is an initiative by HFMtalentindex in partnership with HR Pulse, IPM, HR Network, HR Works and the Singularity Company.

**HFMtalentindex** measures talent for strategic talent management. With HFMtalentindex you have scientifically tested, reliable and valid online assessments for selection, development and talent mobility, including real-time talent analytics dashboards. HR is empowered with their own online talent portal, to get more benefit from talent.

**HR Pulse** is an online publication filled with essential information about how to manage your employee-related questions and issues. Our publication is essential reading for anyone who manages employees or owns their own business.

**The Institute of People Management (IPM)** is the professional body for the people management and HR fraternity founded in 1945 and recognised by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

**HR Network** provides specialist, positively disruptive, business, organisational development, change management, HR, talent management, learning, digital HR webinars, solutions and services to build your Exponential Organisation.

**HRworks** specialises in the niche business of online advertising to the HR profession in South Africa, and is a comprehensive online directory of Human Resources products and services. The website is networked amongst thousands of HR professionals and business leaders.

The biggest problem facing most businesses and organisations is how to leverage and/or develop disruptive technologies, prepare and compete for the future. **The Singularity Company's** purpose is to create a community of like-minded businesses, organizations and people who seek to effect a more sustainable and improved world.

# Foreword

Organisational change is happening more quickly than ever before. Companies are existing in a state of transition, and need the support of their employees through this process. This requires us to let go of the traditional, tried-and-tested methods and experiment with new forms of work, or even completely new business models.

With change being the order of the day, how can we jointly explore and shape the road to this unknown future? This requires different ways of working, leadership, vision and continuous learning. A focus on Learning Agility provides guidance in this uncertain future.

With HR being the architects of people management in organisations, we wanted to find out more about their Learning Agility. This report unpacks the agility of HR in relation to their seniority, the size of their organisation and much more. Take a read through the results and let us know your thoughts!



**Benjamin Buckingham**

Managing Director | HFMtalentindex South Africa



**I never lose.  
I either win or learn.**

Nelson Mandela

# Learning Agility in HR

## HR in South Africa - more practical than strategic

The Learning Agility in HR study is the first of its kind in South Africa, and aims to present a review of the HR field. How agile is HR? Are they able to cope effectively with the challenges inherent in organisational change?

The results show a promising picture. HR professionals in South Africa are very learning agile, overall. In particular, HR professionals demonstrate a strong understanding of their own strengths and development areas, as well as a focus on bettering themselves over time (higher Self-awareness). Self-awareness is one of the core building blocks of Learning Agility.

Overall, HR professionals in South Africa are less focused on Mental Agility. This means that they may take a more practical approach to complex situations, and focus on getting things done. This ties in well with the profession's emphasis on achieving results (higher Results Agility).



In a world that is constantly changing, there is no one subject or set of subjects that will serve you for the foreseeable future, let alone for the rest of your life. The most important skill to acquire now is learning how to learn.

John Naisbitt



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# Reminder: What is Learning Agility?



**Learning Agility is the ability to quickly and flexibly develop new, effective behaviour based on new experiences, and then apply this in practice.**

People who are learning agile absorb more from new situations than people who are less learning agile. They know how to get more out of an experience, are constantly looking for new challenges, look for feedback in order to learn, recognise patterns in unknown situations and effectively engage others to understand experiences and make them meaningful.

Learning Agility is measured according to four dimensions (Change Agility, Mental Agility, People Agility and Results Agility) and one transcending factor: Self-awareness, which influences the scores on all dimensions<sup>1</sup>.



## Change Agility

Curious  
Experiments  
Tries new things



## Mental Agility

Analytical  
Complexity  
New ideas



## Self-awareness

Knowing oneself  
Self-critical  
Development-oriented



## People Agility

Desire to understand  
Constructive towards others  
Open to other cultures



## Results Agility

Ambitious  
Self-confident  
Goal-oriented

<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed description of the different Learning Agility dimensions, see page 24



# HR in South Africa: Overview

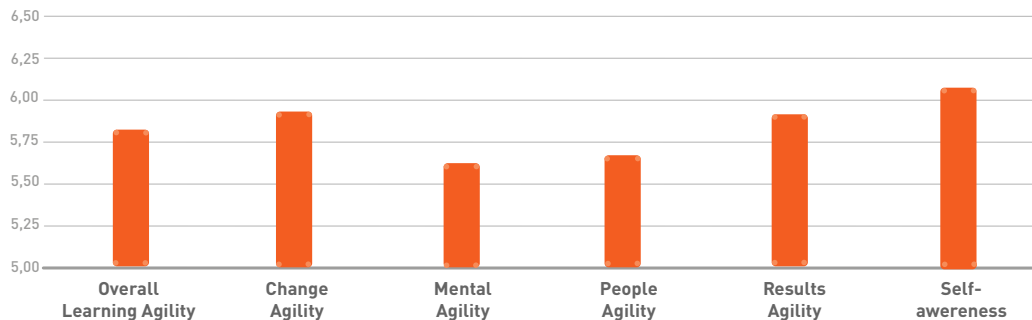
## South Africa: HR are more agile than most!

The conclusion from the South African Learning Agility in HR study is clear: HR professionals are considerably more learning agile than the average South African. As a whole, the group is especially focused on Self-awareness (being development-oriented and aware of their own strengths and weaknesses), Change Agility (being constantly curious) and Results Agility (setting goals in order to learn). South African HR professionals are, however, less open to learning from and through others (lower on People Agility) and are more practical in their approach to solving problems (lower on Mental Agility).

## HR across countries

A similar pattern is seen when comparing the Learning Agility of HR professionals in South Africa and Europe. Both groups are open to new things (higher Change Agility) and are able to reflect on their own actions (higher Self-awareness). However, South African HR professionals are more focused on goals and results when learning from new experiences (higher Results Agility), compared to their European counterparts.

## Learning Agility - overall score



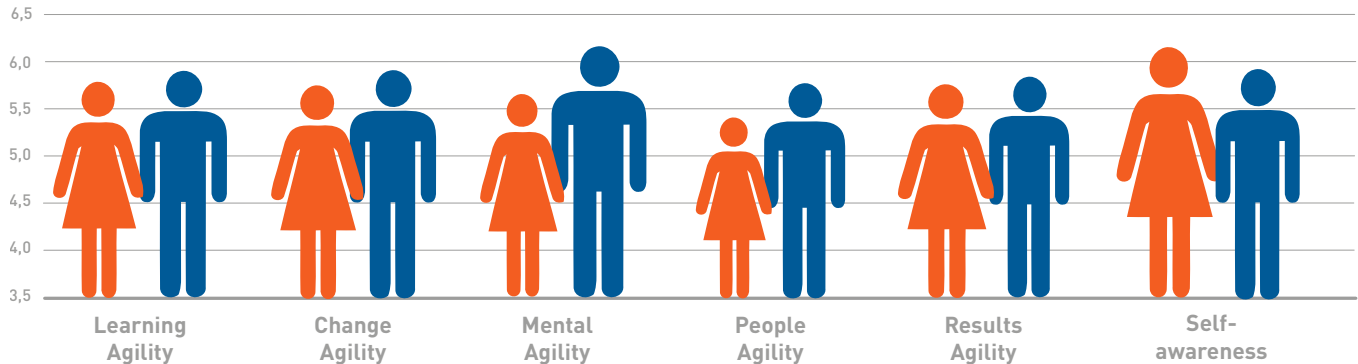
*NB. In all graphs, a 5 is an average score. Scores higher than 5 are above average, scores lower than 5 are below average.*

# Women are more introspective, men are more analytical

Overall, women seem to be better at self-reflection, and are therefore more aware of their own strengths and development areas, as well as more open to feedback (higher Self-awareness). Male colleagues seem to take a more analytical approach, with a focus on achieving an in-depth understanding of problems (Mental Agility).

Both women and men are similarly focused on achieving results and maintaining progress in spite of obstacles or issues (higher Results Agility). Interestingly, both genders are also less likely to welcome and learn from the ideas of others (lower People Agility).

## Men vs women

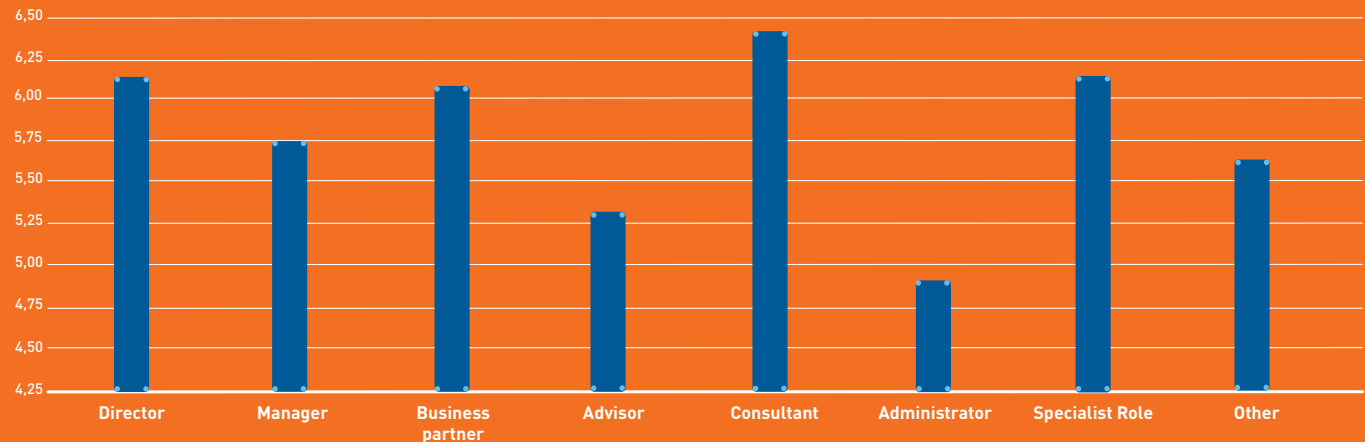


# Consultants are the most agile, followed by Directors

Research studies find that Learning Agility increases along with job level. This same trend is observed amongst HR in South Africa. HR Directors are, by far, the most learning agile, and are also extremely focused on getting things done and achieving results, even when under pressure (higher Results Agility). However, HR professionals in South Africa do buck the trend in one key way - HR Consultants are even more learning agile than Directors! This makes sense when considering the fast-paced environment of a typical HR Consultant.

The agility of HR Business Partners (HRBPs) falls just below the Director level, followed by those in Specialist Roles (e.g. Psychologists) and HR Managers. In keeping with the international trend, HR Administrators are the least learning agile, and therefore need a larger amount of time to adapt to new experiences.

## Learning Agility and HR Level

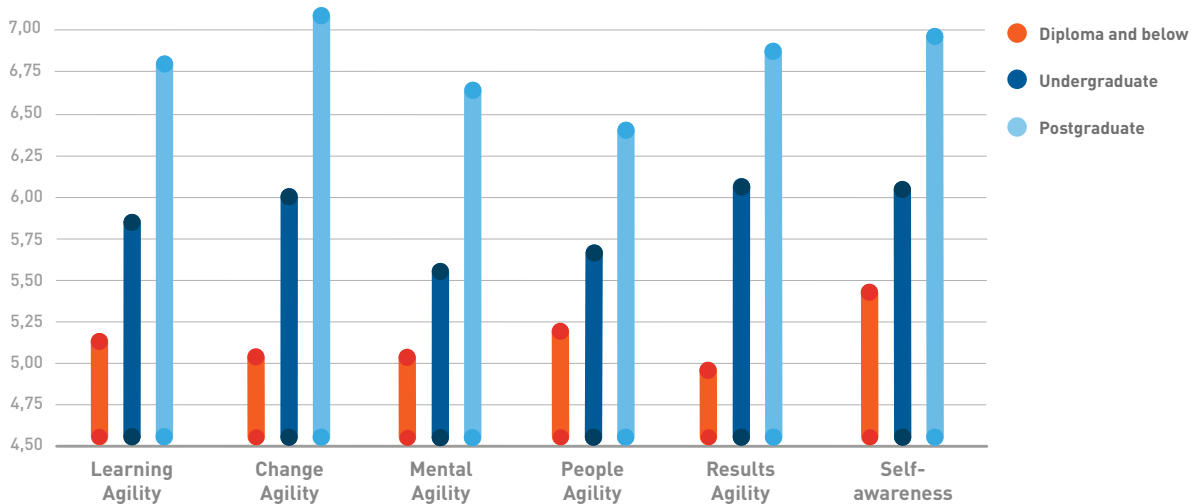


# Education impacts on Learning Agility

While Learning Agility is not linked to cognitive ability, it is impacted by an individual's level of education. Those with a Postgraduate education level are more agile across all five domains. Those with an education level of Diploma/Matric and below are typically less learning agile.

As a result, HR professionals at this level are more likely to come across as cautious (lower Change Agility) and are typically less driven by targets and goals (lower Results Agility).

## Education



**“It is not the strongest  
species that survives, nor  
the most intelligent. It is the  
one that is most adaptable  
to change.”**

Darwin



# Leaders are all about results

When Leadership is compared to Non-Leadership, the overall results are the same. In general, Leaders and Non-leaders in HR are equally learning agile.

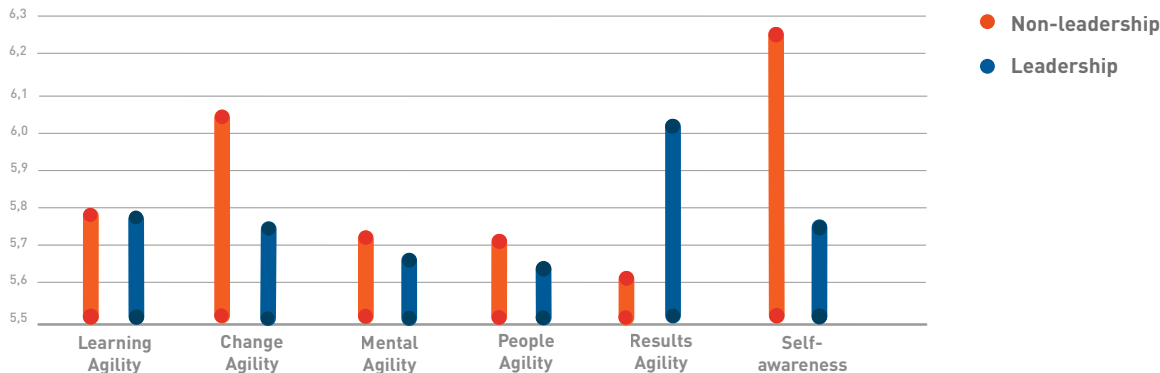
Reviewing the data in more detail shows that Leaders and Non-leaders differ in their approach to change.

Those in Non-Leadership positions are more curious and willing to experiment (Change Agility); they also spend more time reflecting on their own strengths and weaknesses, and asking for feedback from peers (Self-awareness).

Leaders, in contrast, tend to focus more on results, and will work to find solutions when obstacles arise (Results Agility). Leaders are more likely to set their own direction and won't take as much time to reflect on this (Self-awareness).

Interestingly, both groups are less oriented towards People Agility, indicating that they are more individually driven, and focus less on learning from others.

## Leaders vs non-leaders



## Notes

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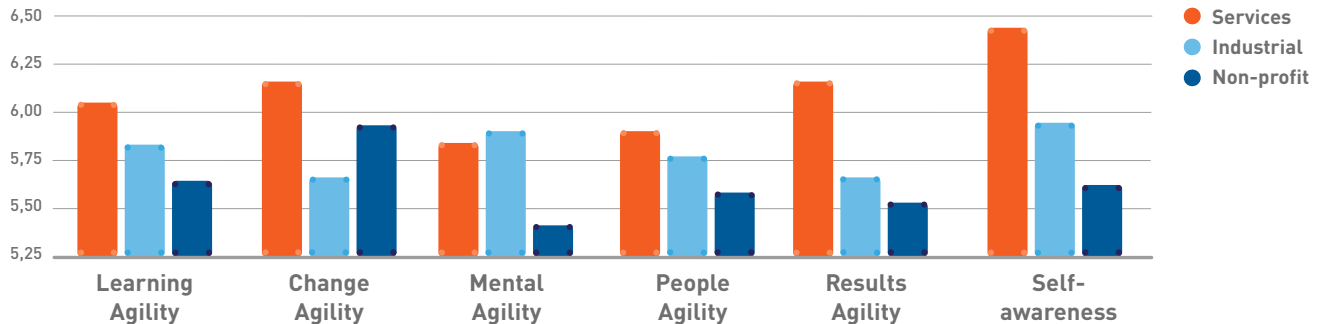
# The Services sector is at the forefront of agility

The Services sector (e.g. Financial, Communications) is the most learning agile overall. Within this sector, HR professionals are especially focused on self-reflection and feedback from others (Self-awareness). The exception in the Services sector is Mental Agility, which would point to a more pragmatic approach rather than deep analytical thought as a mechanism for dealing with change.

In contrast, those within the Non-profit sector are generally the least Learning Agile. Similarly to the Services sector, there is less focus on Mental Agility: HR professionals in this area therefore put more energy into practical problems with shorter turnaround times.

The Industrial sector (e.g. Construction, Mining) demonstrates higher Mental Agility than the other two groups. HR professionals in this sector show a greater reliance on theory and figures, and the application thereof in their work.

## Learning Agility amongst South African industries



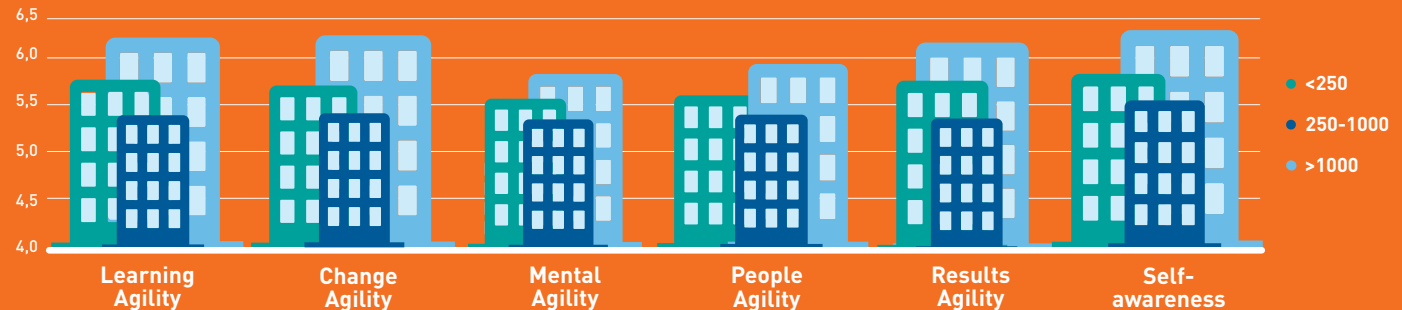


# Size matters

The relationship between organisation size and Learning Agility follows the dynamic trend seen in Europe. Large organisations – those with 1,000 or more employees – clearly have the most learning agile HR teams. However, HR in small businesses (those with fewer than 250 employees) tend to be more learning agile than their mid-sized counterparts (250 – 1000 employees).

The fierce competition and career focus within large organisations may lead to a greater need for agility: there is a lot more experimentation (higher Change Agility) and introspection (higher Self Awareness) amongst these HR professionals. In contrast, small organisations (<250) often need to be extremely flexible in order to survive in a tough market, which also requires HR people to be future-oriented and agile.

## Organisation size



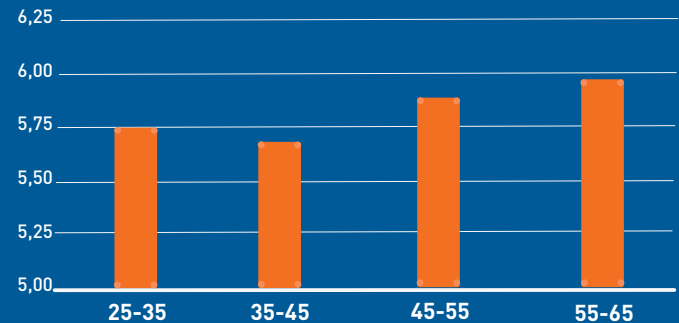
# How does Learning Agility relate to age?

Statistics show that Learning Agility generally peaks at around 30 years old, and then decreases with age. South African HR professionals buck this trend: they in fact become more learning agile as they grow older!

When younger than 35, HR professionals rely more on experimentation (Change Agility) and spend more time on personal development (Self-awareness). Between 45 and 55, they realise the importance of learning from the people around them. The ability to learn through others (People Agility) increases with age; learning through others is about understanding the cultural norms of ones' peers: age seems to benefit this process in the South African context.

Whereas People Agility increases with age, Self-awareness declines with age. It would seem that HR professionals become less likely to reflect on their own behaviour as they get older and gain more practical work experience.

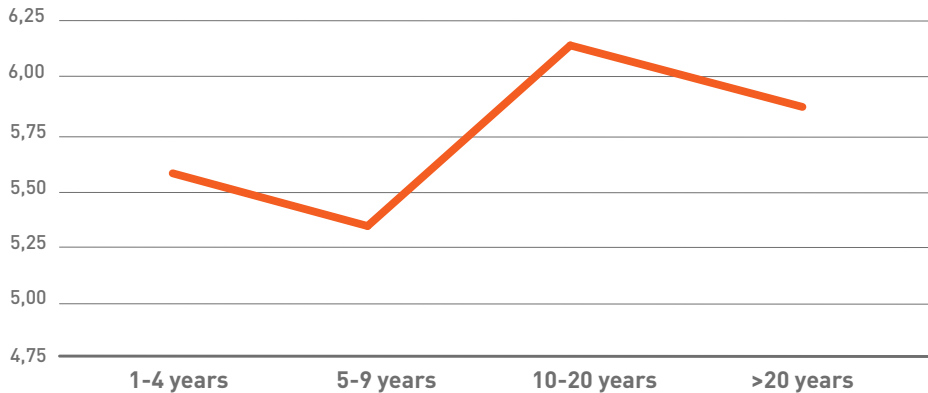
Age



If we look at the number of years of work experience instead of age, we see a decline in the agility of HR professionals who have been working for more than 20 years. South African HR professionals experience a “slump” in Learning Agility between 5 to 9 years of work experience,

a trend that is echoed by their European counterparts. This could be attributed to the fact that within the first 1 to 4 years in the workplace, an individual is constantly learning and developing; after 5 years, he or she may reach a plateau within a particular area.

### Learning Agility & work experience

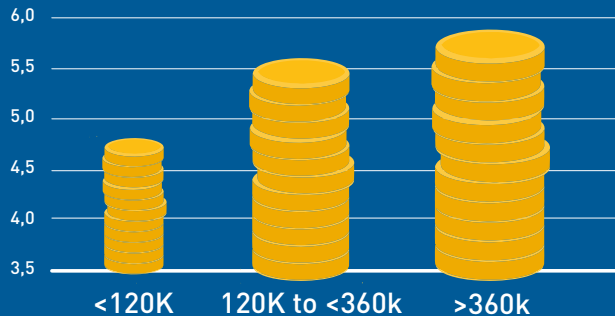


# Does Learning Agility pay?

Does someone with higher Learning Agility also receive a higher salary? This does seem to be logical, since training, industry, organisation size and job level are all taken into account in salaries. All of these factors also have an impact on Learning Agility. Those who earn an annual salary of R120,000 or less are typically the least learning agile. Thereafter, there is a significant jump to the next income category – those

who earn between R120,000 and R360,000 per annum. Those who earn R360,000 or more per year display more agility in the workplace. However, the difference between this group and the previous group is slight, indicating that a ceiling is reached.

## Salary



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## SUMMARY

# HR and Learning Agility under the microscope

## Ahead of the curve, but not on all fronts

This study investigated the Learning Agility of HR professionals in South Africa. The bar is above average when compared to the typical professional outside of HR. However, HR could benefit from focusing more on their Mental Agility and People Agility, two areas where scores were relatively lower.

### South Africa vs. Europe

When comparing South African HR professionals to their European counterparts we see some differences on a more detailed level. Especially in how they apply the five agility domains in practice.

Both groups feel comfortable experimenting with new things (Change Agility) and are able to embrace self-development (Self-awareness). Both are also relatively less oriented towards Mental Agility, which may indicate shorter-term problem solving with quicker turnaround times. What is interesting is that the average HR professional in Europe focuses more on learning through and from other people (People Agility) and less on achieving targets (Results Agility). This pattern is reversed in the South African context.

### Job function matters – but it doesn't tell the full story

As seen in numerous research studies, job level impacts on Learning Agility. This trend is also reflected in the current study, where HR Directors are more learning agile than HR Managers who, in turn, are more learning agile than HR Administrators. What is very interesting, however, is that HR Consultants are the most learning agile out of all these groups. Considering the typical environment of an HR consultant, individuals may be attracted to these types of roles because of their naturally higher Learning Agility; alternatively, their environment – with its shifting priorities and constant change – may serve to develop their agility over time.

### Agility shifts with age and experience

As HR professionals grow older and gain more experience in the workplace, they typically become more learning agile overall. However, the pattern of the five agilities differs. People Agility typically increases with age, as HR professionals become less focused on having their own voices heard and more focused on hearing the voices of others. In contrast, Self-awareness typically decreases with age, as does the energy expended on personal development and self-reflection.

### **Industry and organisation size**

HR professionals within the Services sector are significantly more learning agile, compared to the Non-profit and Industrial sectors. This could be related to the competitiveness and fast pace of service-based organisations.

Other elements of an organisation also impact on the agility of its HR team, particularly its size. However, it's not a simple picture. While very large organisations (1,000+ employees) possess the most agile HR teams, small businesses (<250 employees) are next in line and rely on their agility to maintain the organisation's competitiveness in the face of change.



# How is Learning Agility structured?

**Learning Agility consists of four dimensions and one transcending factor: Self-awareness. Self-awareness plays a special role in shaping Learning Agility, as it can have either a beneficial or a limiting effect on your overall score.**



**Change Agility** People who score high on Change Agility are always curious. This curiosity is fuelled by the new and the unknown. They enjoy experimenting, trying things out and new experiences. They also learn more from their experiences because they are motivated to delve into something they have not done before.



**Mental Agility** People who score high on Mental Agility welcome complexity and ambiguity, as it allows them the opportunity to create new clarity with their ideas. They enjoy analysing problems and can often understand things differently by thinking outside the box. They have an open perspective and are challenged by new ideas. This allows them to understand more quickly how a situation works and what they can learn from what they experience.



**People Agility** People who score high on People Agility are constructive towards others and open to people with different backgrounds and opinions. They have a need to understand other people and tend to take their opinions seriously. This makes it easier for them to engage effectively in a team setting, and as a result they are more likely to learn from the experiences of others. Moreover, they can adapt more easily, for example to people from other cultures. This encourages people to share more with them.



**Results Agility** People who score high on Results Agility need to be successful and are always looking for the best way to achieve results. They are ambitious and self-assured, with a tendency to remain calm under pressure. Because they are better able to set goals in new and unknown situations, they remain focused and are able to learn more quickly about what does or does not matter to make new things a success.





**Self-awareness** People who score high on Self-awareness know their own strengths and weaknesses. They are often critical of their own performance and actions. This makes them keen to do things better, and their overall willingness to learn is higher. Self-awareness therefore plays a special role in Learning Agility: a high score benefits the other Learning Agility dimensions.



# Tips



## Mental Agility

- Ask questions if things are unclear and make sure that you always have a clear picture of what has been discussed.
- Make a list of questions for each discussion that you want answered on the subject.
- Plan moments to think about your own approach and what can be improved.



## People Agility

- Consider what you can learn from each of your team members, and make a point to try and do so. You can approach this formally (asking them to teach you) or informally (observing their actions and behaviour).
- Try not to give counter-arguments for one day. Instead, only ask counter-questions and find out which new insights you have come up with.
- Identify what information you are missing and which questions you could ask colleagues.



## Change Agility

- From time to time, pick up a project where you cannot fall back on your existing knowledge and experience.
- When you have to pick up new work and you feel unclear or stuck, think about your reasons for this.
- Try to work with colleagues who are more inclined to take risks.



## Results Agility

- Set yourself a list of short and medium-term objectives. Work towards the set objectives, and involve your supervisor and team where necessary.
- Keep track of the results of the projects that you are part of.
- If your attention becomes fragmented by less important secondary goals, ask for help from your manager.



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## Interview

# HR and the agile workspace

Interview with Dr. Jerry Gule

**Dr Jerry Gule, CEO of the Institute of People Management and executive coach, gives his view of Learning Agility and the HR challenges of 2020 and beyond...**

### **How are the current HR challenges different from previous years?**

For the first time, HR practitioners have to deal with intergenerational issues as different generations are occupying space in the workplace. The well-entrenched Baby Boomers who, for all intents and purposes, set up modern organisational structures and leadership styles are now on their way out. New practices are crashing into what were once revered corridors of power. Some companies are not ready for these changes. The result is that these new generational employees may just up and go if they find the culture is not suitable for them.

### **HR fits into this by puzzle by:**

- Having to fix archaic company cultures, sometimes in the face of resistance from company leaders and managers.
- Preparing on-boarding programmes based on antiquated systems that the new-era employees may

find boring. However, in the face of reduced budgets, HR may lack the professionals and modern resources necessary to modernise its practices.

- Having to do more with less. The overall reductions seen in staff complements means that employees across the board find themselves stretched, stressed and burning out in larger numbers than before. The onus is on HR to fix this; however, HR is also inadequately supported, both financially and otherwise.
- Monitoring the constant changes in the nature of work and being able to find suitably qualified candidates to meet these challenges. Whilst previously the debate centred around finding skilled and experienced talent, the game has changed. HR has to work with leaders and managers to find people who are willing to learn and unlearn skills as jobs change. HR is also faced with the huge challenge and AI (artificial intelligence) assisted workspaces.

### **Organisations in South Africa are undergoing a lot of changes in terms of digitisation, new technologies and shifting job roles. How do you feel HR can support these changes?**

The digital era is bringing unprecedented changes in how things work. It is predicted that in less than 20 years, there is going to be a far closer link between humans and machines. In fact, many organisations and people think that it would be better to work with machines than humans, as machines do not complain and do not go on strike.

But will smart machines not “unionise” and perpetrate strikes too? (Just kidding, but again you never know, it is said that some of the advanced machines are capable of learning and developing a language of their own!).

The future will require high levels of collaboration. Therefore, to expect HR to continue its traditional role of spearheading change management whilst everyone else sits back is no longer feasible. The whole paradigm has to shift: in preparing for the future, the burden must not be put on HR alone. The digital strategy of an organisation must permeate the very fibre of the company, involving employees at all levels and proactively driving change.

**Why do you think Learning Agility is important – in general, and especially for HR?**

The key thing to realise is that learning, in general, is a non-stop activity. Hence organisations need to be learning entities. When we say “a learning organisation”, in effect we are saying that the people in the organisation must be open to continuous learning and development. So Learning Agility is crucial for superior organisational performance and results.

An organisation that does not learn from its past performance and make improvements is more likely to be relegated to the bottom leagues. Continuing to use the analogy of “leagues” a soccer example may be apt here. Say for instance a big brand soccer team loses a



game and has another big game scheduled the following weekend. If that team fails to use the intervening period to reflect on what went wrong and learn from it, it is more likely to face another hammering. For the players to perform better they need to get feedback from their coach, take that to heart and practice, practice and practice so they can perform better in the next game. They must have Learning Agility as they only have a short time to unlearn their previous strategy and relearn a different approach before the next game.

### **The importance of Learning Agility for HR**

Learning Agility is especially important for HR because of the sheer plethora of situations and interactions that a typical HR professional has in a day. For HR to increasingly handle these situations and interactions in an ever-improving way, HR needs to learn new strategies from each encounter. Furthermore, the role of HR also centres around helping others to learn more for better performance in a fast-paced environment.

Lastly, HR is responsible for bringing talent into an organisation and by applying the principles of Learning Agility, HR would stand a good chance of managing the talent pipeline effectively and efficiently. These principles would assist HR in carefully hiring employees who are well suited to the new roles and requirements of the organisation.

**“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn”**

Alvin Tofler, *The Futurist*

### **Could you reflect on the impact of Learning Agility in the context of talent management?**

Talent management is about resourcing an organisation with the right people in the right positions and at the right time. It covers the entire spectrum from entry to exit with an emphasis on making sure that the talent is effectively engaged throughout their career in the organisation. This means roles or jobs must be well designed and mapped so as to deploy people correctly based on their strengths, abilities and the nature of the role. This calls for an ability to know the makeup of the talent that is being placed across the organisation in terms of their natural inclinations and ways of working.

In talent management, the drive is to make sure that an organisation has talent that is open to learning, prepared for their next big role and able to deliver the required results.



For HR to become more learning agile there are a few actions that can be taken:

- **Understand the mandate** of HR in every project – lack of clarity on what needs to be done can result in time wastage and a lot of exasperation for all concerned. Getting the brief right always helps to eliminate “rework” or working at a tangent.
- Adopt a learning-focused style – the days of “policing over the enterprise” are gone as things change. Whilst HR has to ensure due process and proper governance, it must do so with the understanding that it is about **co-creation** with clients and stakeholders. It is about partnering with those who are being served to make sure that the right and innovative business solutions, with a dose of HR insight, are being put on the table rather than being perceived as stumbling blocks to be avoided.
- Have regular and shorter meetings with internal clients – things tend to go awry when there is poor communication between the customer and the supplier. In the context of the enterprise HR is the supplier of services to line management and employees. When there is no regular contact and communication between the client and the supplier, misunderstanding is guaranteed. HR need to seek out their clients and make sure to “**get customer feedback**” so that they can hit the bulls-eye when they render services.





**“Fail fast, learn faster”**

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