



How to build an agile workforce that embraces change

Written by Financial Times
November 2021





An agile workforce helps organizations to cope with disruption and exploit its opportunities. But what does agility mean in this context, and how can businesses make it happen?

How to build an agile workforce that embraces change

The disruption caused by emerging technologies, changing consumer demands, climate change and once-in-a-lifetime events such as the Covid-19 pandemic is daunting for businesses. The consequences can be far-reaching and severe for employers and employees alike, and can be impossible to predict.

But it is not impossible to prepare for those consequences. Organizations must invest in their biggest competitive advantage - their workforce. Most importantly, they need to make it agile, because an agile workforce can react to change at speed, come up with innovative solutions and drive new business growth. It is a critical competitive differentiator.

What is workforce agility?

Workforce agility is based on a simple premise: bringing together the best people — from within or outside an organization — to identify, adapt to and solve new challenges.

“When I think about workforce agility, I'm really thinking about the way that teams of individuals come together to execute pieces of work in ways that are different than the traditional corporate structure,” says Christian Reilly, VP technology strategy at Citrix.

Bringing together the best minds to address specific, urgent challenges can be highly effective. We have seen its impact in the development of the Covid-19 vaccines and in the way communities and business have united around humanitarian and climate change crises. And it is something that organizations can do internally to overcome their biggest obstacles.

“In any organization, you want the workforce to be as close as possible to solving the biggest problems of the organization,” says Tim Fung, co-founder and CEO of Airtasker, an online marketplace that allows users to outsource tasks. “And I would say that an agile workforce is a workforce that can adapt to those problems as they change over time.”

Hiring and building teams around old problems creates a “rigid or brittle machine, because it can solve the one problem you have today”, says Fung. “The risk of doing this is that you get left behind or disrupted. When the problem changes, you are not going to be able to move quickly to solve it.”

With an agile workforce, an organization is more likely to identify those new problems before they hit, collaborate at speed, and then capture the opportunities before their competitors. They might even become drivers of disruption themselves.

Create a culture of empowerment

According to Fung, the agile organization “focuses on solving problems rather than providing set solutions”. This approach depends on a culture of empowerment that gives employees freedom to solve problems and the data and tools to make decisions.

But only 45 percent of respondents in [research by Fujitsu](#) say that, in order to boost workforce agility, their organizations give employees the right data and tools. Access to the right data and tools is critical because it gives employees the ability to identify the problems faster and then find the right solutions.

And only 30 percent say they have decentralized decision-making. That will be a problem. Decentralizing decision-making can streamline ways of working and allow employees to focus on coming up with creative solutions to problems, rather than wasting time on bureaucratic processes.

A portrait of Tim Fung, co-founder and CEO of Airtasker. He is a middle-aged man with short, graying hair, wearing glasses and a blue jacket. He is smiling and looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a blurred indoor setting with warm lighting.

The agile organization “focuses on solving problems rather than providing set solutions”.

Tim Fung, co-founder and CEO of Airtasker

Rethink the skills you need

Talent with specialist knowledge is of course crucial to any organization, but there is a risk that “those people are good for the problem that was identified when you hired them”, says Fung. “But if the problems keep changing and evolving, you want people who have a growth mindset.”

Employees with a growth mindset can identify new problems. “They may be less specialized in some sense, because they are not experts in one thing, but these people can keep evolving to identify what the new problems are,” says Fung.

Tech skills are also essential, of course, and many organizations are preparing their employees to work with complex technologies. 58 percent of respondents in Fujitsu's research say that their organization provides training in new technical or digital skills that enable employees to use technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotic process automation.

Another important skill is the ability to lead and collaborate with a workforce that is working remotely. This will be essential: 42 percent of organizations in Fujitsu's research have adopted a hybrid working approach to boost the agility of their workforces.

“Giving managers the skills to lead remote teams is critical, and is a success factor for home working,” says Jill Maples, people and culture director at logistics firm Hermes. “Leaders need to know how to lead their teams in what has become a new way of working. They need to be able to drive performance and, ultimately, engage their people in a different way.”



**Only 18 percent are using
the global talent pool.**

Fujitsu Work Life Shift Research

Tap into a wider talent pool

Bringing together the best minds to solve problems is a key element of workforce agility, and organizations have to recognize that the best talent is not always in-house. “Having a talent pool that is not always from your own internal resources actually has a significant upside,” says Reilly.

The remote working experiment of 2020 has opened the global talent gates, and organizations can now work with permanent and gig workers anywhere in the world. However, Fujitsu’s research shows that few firms are exploiting this opportunity: only 27 percent are tapping into the gig workforce, and only 18 percent are using the global talent pool.

Platforms such as Upwork and Airtasker can help organizations here. They also offer a model of skills-sharing that can encourage organizations to look for skills in unusual places.

"Airtasker is a trusted online community marketplace focused on empowering people to monetize their skills — no matter what they are, across a variety of categories," says Fung. "This enables skills to be shared anywhere in the community, which allows for a much more agile way of building up an economy and getting things done."

But bringing together a global workforce of permanent and self-employed workers to solve constantly evolving problems makes long-term talent resourcing difficult. There are also other implications, such as tax and legal requirements. Organizations will therefore need to revisit their talent strategies and resources on a more regular basis.

For Hermes, the rapid growth in online deliveries since the start of the pandemic has made resource planning more challenging. "We are continually reviewing our workforce planning to make sure we have the right people in the right place at the right time to deal with the volume," says Maples.

And the Hermes HR team works with leaders to identify talent gaps and how best they can address them. "We review our talent plans formally twice a year," she adds. "But we talk about people and skills weekly because we need to ensure that we can adapt to change quickly."

Reviewing the skills gaps and looking for innovative ways in the organization to fill them will help organizations to stay competitive. Hybrid working has given organizations access to a wider talent pool than ever before, and those who exploit this opportunity will lead the future of work.