Workforce Agility: A Review on Agility Drivers and Organizational Practices

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Abstract

The rapid changes in the business environment compel organizations to find new strategies for operations. The notion of agility became the most predominant and popular strategy for dealing with an unpredictable environment. Despite the importance of workforce agility, literature has mainly focused on manufacturing and organizational agility, although it stresses requiring an agile workforce. The shortage of study brought limited knowledge and practice in the discipline affects the behaviour of enterprises. This article aims to provide significant research insights by exploring an extensive survey of the available literature on workforce agility. Also,it identifies various workforce agility drivers and organizational practices. It is found that an agile workforce simultaneously possesses multiple interdependent capabilities benefiting organizations operating in highly uncertain environments.

Keywords: Agility; workforce agility; agility drivers; organizational practices

Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed the constant need for organizations to adjust to changing and unpredictable environments. It is required to have competitive and differential advantagesover othersto embrace and adapt to the ever-changing organizational environments (Nijssen & Paauwe, 2012). Out of themany solutions proposed, flexible organization and an agile workforce have gained predominant importance. With the hightechnology boom and restructuring of the organization, the need for agile organizations aroused. The agility provides a competitive advantage in service quality, speed, and customer-centric behaviour (Harraf, Wanasika, Tate, & Talbott, 2015). Hence, the workforce should be equally flexible and agile as the technological processes to cope with the changing needs. Thus, agility has become exponentially crucial for organizations (Wageeh, 2016).

The agile workforce consists of creative employees with a positive mindset who believe in self-development through teamwork. The crew becomes compatible with dynamic problem solving and comes up with feasible solutions. The agility should exhibit by the top management and the entire workforce. There are five ways an organization can help the employees gain courage and skills to handle crises: (1) Retention of knowledge-force by providing better development opportunities and catering to individual requirements. (2) Empowering human resources by giving them opportunities to develop skills and gain autonomy. (3) Human values are a priority; it is of prime importance to have a workspace with cordial relationships and respect between all the communities and cultures. (4) Collaboration between different functional entities of the organizations helps generate understanding and cooperation between various entities. 5) Experimentation in terms

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of practices to promote flexibility and agility, brainstorming sessions to generate new ideas and alternate solutions and techniques to improve work-life balance and well-being of the employees.

This paper aims to provide insights into the agile workforce by analyzing the existing literature onagility. We discuss the need for an agile workforce, agility drivers and enablers, and organizational practices to promote workforce agility.

Conceptualization of Agility in the workplace

The term agile manufacturing was coined in the year 1991.The Agility Forum defined it as the ability to thrive and prosper in a competitive environment of continuous change and respond quickly to a marketdriven by customer preferences and customer-based valuing of products (Gunasekaran et al., 2019; Kumar, Singh, & Jain, 2019; Murray, 1996). From the definition that the speed and flexibility of the organization to adapt to its changing environment are emphasized as the primary attributes of agility (Abdelilah, El Korchi, & Balambo, 2018; Sherehiy, Ã, & Layer, 2007). Other aspects are responsiveness to change (Gren & Lenberg, 2019) and quality and customization of products (Boubaker, Jemaï, Sahin, & Dallery, 2019; Eltawy & Gallear, 2017; Perera, Soosay, & Sandhu, 2019).The requirements of manufacturing entities to respond to the unique pressures,cost, and quality constraints have led to the adoption of agility (Dahmardeh & Banihashemi, 2010).

As agility linked to manufacturing, technology utilization and process improvements got more comprehensive attention. Recently,organizations realized human resources as a factor that aids in adapting to the changing environment (Alavi & Wahab, 2017). Thus,the success of organizational agility depends on the speedy implementation and utilization of new technologies. Information systems, business process integration, adoption of flexible organizational structures, external and internal cooperation and most importantly, a flexible and adequately

trained workforce play a significant role in the success (Breu, Hemingway, Strathern, & Bridger, 2001; Dubey & Gunasekaran, 2015). The agile workforce accomplishes the organizational goals by proactively utilizing their creative skillset (Breu et al., 2001). Organizations must continuously remain updated about their environment to anticipate future skill requirements. The developments in information technology and its utilization in organizations have changed howthe workforce performs. Agile forces are more flexible in space and time and can easily fit into any internal, external or cross-sectional collaborative environment (Dubey & Gunasekaran, 2015; Sumukadas & Sawhney, 2010). Workforce agility offersmore incredible benefits to the organization in terms of increased productivity, profits, market shares, speedy adaptation to change and competitive advantage over others in the market (Breu et al., 2001).

The disruption and economic crisis brought a flexible and adaptable workforce to organizations. Recent human resource management research states the importance of dealing with the dynamic and unpredictable environment by becoming more agile in their daily operations (Muduli, 2016; Muduli & Pandya, 2018; Nijssen & Paauwe, 2012; Sherehiy et al., 2007).

The term "workforce agility" is used to collect research articles for the literature review. After an initial check with the abstracts, 57 studies were found helpful for this study. We followed the most widely used (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003)model, including three stages of planning, conducting and reporting. All the efforts aimed to fulfil our objectives to understand and discover the needs and drivers of workforce agility and organizational practices.

Need for an Agile Workforce

Workforce agility is the ability of the knowledge force to find an optimal way to react to the turbulence in the environment at the optimal time and look for opportunities in the challenges. It caters to the need of

the whole organization (which includes the different functional entities, practices and procedures, organizational culture and infrastructure). An agile workforce makes organizationsadaptable and responsive to the competition, changing market and customer preferences, technological advancements and human resource insufficiencies.

The external and internal environment of the organizations can provide opportunities and threats; it depends on the organization's workforce to forecast and analyze the changes(Vázquez-Bustelo, Avella, & Fernández, 2007). The external drivers can be unpredictable and uncertain situations, fierce competition, changes in customer preferences, and advancements in technology,where the organizations needcross-trained agile workforce to react and adapt to changes and the capability to exploit opportunities and turn them into benefits for the firm (Patil & Suresh, 2019). For this, workers need to be multi-skilled andstay abreast of new conditions in an unpredictable environment (Qin & Nembhard, 2015)(Lyons, Biltz, & Whittall, 2017; Patil & Suresh, 2019).An efficient and agile knowledge force predictsmarket changes and keeps up with customer preferences, thus retaining existing customers and generating new market space (Chonko & Jones, 2005; Gren & Lenberg, 2019).

The internal environment needs an agile workforce to reconfigure work tasks and procedures, creative and prompt problem solving, manage work stress, andorganizational flexibility.An agile enterprise exists only when the workforce has an excellent problem-solving ability, capacity to embrace new change and the willingness to accept challenges (Patil & Suresh, 2019). The predictive behaviour of the workforce about the market as well as the internal organizational process helps them develop multiple competencies and adapt quickly to new projects and tasks (Muduli, 2013, 2016; Patil & Suresh, 2019). The toleranceto thrive in stressful situations and the flexible workforcehandle change and ambiguity within and outside the organization.

Drivers of Workforce Agility

The agile workforce is characterized by its ability to adapt to the ever-changing market needs and customer preferences. It shows the ability to forecast and predict the possibilities of future market trends, generate innovative ideas and accomplish goals with the optimal use of resources(Alavi & Wahab, 2017; Patil & Suresh, 2019; Vázquez-Bustelo et al., 2007). In the previous section, we have discussed the need for an agile workforce. This section deals with the personal characteristics which induce workforce agility.

Interpersonal adaptability: Interpersonal adaptability enhances the person to work quickly on multiple assignments or across different groups, engaging with teams and fostering a collaborative environment with a singular focus on task accomplishment (Griffin & Hesketh, 2005). Dynamic organizations rapidly develop new solutions and acquire marketplace agility through an adaptive workforce, grab most market shares, and get much profit (Dyer & Shafer, 1998; Shafer, Dyer, Kilty, Amos, & Ericksen, 2001).

Professional flexibility: Rapid technological advancement, networks, and new manufacturing tools require flexible work to achieve agility. Reconfiguration of the various organizational process captures emerging opportunities by addressing unanticipated issues (Qin & Nembhard, 2015). A flexible workforce allows organizations to reframe and restructure various assignments and realign the vital force to critical customer problems (Patil & Suresh, 2019). (Sherehiy, 2008) have identified workforce flexibility as one of the essential characteristics of enterprise agility.

Proactivity & Quick responsiveness: Proactivity consists of five parts: (i) Prediction(ii) Prevent(iii) Plan (iv) Participate (v) Perform (Bindl & Parker, 2010). Thus, prompt responsiveness to changes from the plan or schedule due to unforeseen circumstances helps maintain output

products and services (Qin & Nembhard, 2015).

The mindset of the workforce: Many organizations promote agility by offering incentives to the employees and implementing agility through organizational policies, but in this process, they tend to overlook the most critical driver of an agile workforce, i.e., the mindset of the employees. Three types of mindsets are required: (i) Growth mindset identifies the potential and intelligence of oneself and others and sees the change in the environment as an attribute to grow, develop, and flourish. (ii) The open mindset opens oneself to the ideas of others and accepts collaboration. (iii) Promotion mindset keeps advancement and accomplishment in mind while dealing with change. (iv) The outward mindset observes others and utilizes all learning opportunities (Gottfredson, 2018, 2019).

Resiliency: With increased stress and the risk of burnout in today's organizations, resiliency is a quality attribute to cope with turbulence and take calculated risks. There are many ways in which resiliency in the workplace can cultivate, some of which are: the use of mindfulness practices, division and distribution of cognitive load, taking detachment breaks, practising mental agility, and fostering compassion (Fernandez, 2016; Trifoglio, 2018)

Self-motivation: It is a drive that pushes the employee forward towards the achievement of personal as well as organizational goals. The motivation can be from different parameters like rewards, recognition, supervisor support, teamwork, responsibility, and autonomy. The employees are motivated when they have the required skills to handle multiple responsibilities with confidence (Aloysius, 2012; Robescu & Iancu, 2016)

Collaboration & Openness to information: The agile workforce comprises employees open to collaboration with any

project team formations and data from any source; they analyze it and store it for future reference (Muduli, 2009, 2016, 2017)(Sherehiy et al., 2007).

As knowledge and skills, many authors identified intrapersonal attributes as critical features. The multi-skilled workforce that can adapt to changes determines the organization's success(Alavi & Wahab, 2017).

Organizational practices to promote Workforce Agility

The literature provides evidence that the organizations promoting workforce agility are proactive to change compared to other observatory and reactive organizations about the changing scenarios. Humanresource professionals face challenges in implementing organizational practices in a dynamic environment. It becomes vital for the HR professionals to foster leadership that facilitates knowledge sharing, trust, the delegation of authority, teamwork and citizenship behaviour which in turn promotes agility in the workforce, thereby making the crew more compatible with changes(Alavi & Wahab, 2017; Heilmann, 2018; Sumukadas &Sawhney, 2010). There are two kinds of organizational practices that promote agility, one is strategy-based, and the other is growth-based. The strategy-based HRM practice is strictly related to the organization's business strategy(Alavi & Wahab, 2017). The growth-oriented practices are development based and focus on learning and building workforce competence.

Some of the organizational practices to promote workforce agility are:

Learning, training and developing a knowledge workforce: Organizations realize that constant improvement means a commitment to learning. Thus, training is provided to the employees to make them compatible and multi-skilled. Training and development centres prepare modules and materials and conductemployee training programs (Garvin, 2015).

Employee empowerment: Empowerment has four cognitions, meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. It generates

a sense of autonomy in the employee, who is an essential predictor of workforce agility (Sherehiy et al., 2007).

Rewards and compensation: Literature shows that non-traditional rewards such as skill-based pay and improvement incentives are more effective than traditional rewards like profit sharing and gain sharing. Non-monetary rewards are equally effective in promoting agility in the workforce (Modgil, 2018).

Organizational structure: With the changes in the market and the boom in information technology, the organizational structure has drastically changed. The tall structures are replaced by more flat structures,providing employees autonomy. Increased virtual workspaces and co-working spaces enable organizations to be more decentralized, which aids agility and flexibility.

Teamwork and collaboration: As the organizations operate in a dynamic environment, the organization's functional structure has given way to a more collaborative organization wherein, for a project, different departments or functional units collaborate and forms teams to work on the project (Dizari & Garoosi, 2015; Trehan, 2017). Agility is the collaboration between the organization's employees and between the organization and its stakeholders.

Future research directions

With the growing attention to research and development in digitalization, artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT), more research is required to find the enablers and management practices to promote workforce agility. Theenablers, such as proactivity, innovation, resilience, self-motivation and collaboration, are identified, but further study is required to find the extent to which these enable agility in the workforce. Also, workforce agility as a management strategy to cope with rapid changes can be further studied in alternative work arrangements;the gig economy. Earlier, the employees used to have a psychological contract with a firm for a more extended period, but nowadays, they showcase psychological

contracts with the employer until they work for them; it can even be for a short period. So, the psychological contract of the agile workforce in the gig economy is emerging to conduct research. Innovation is the product of individual characteristics and results of management practices. Hence, further studying how the agile workforce or organizational practices designed to develop agility impact innovation can be studied. The overall structure of the organizations is changing; now is the age of flexibility and autonomy for the employees. With this comes specific problems of the psychological contract, information overload, security and self-management. The future requires a self-driven workforce. So, the impact of employees' personalities on participation, decision-making, competency development, and change management can be further studied.

Conclusion

Workforce agility is the ability of the employees to quickly and optimally react to the changes in the workplace and business environment. The agile workforce is proactive concerning the changes in the environments and problem solving; adaptive to the organizational structural and functional changes. With the boom of information technology and its utilization in every spear of work-life, it has become a requirement to have employees with IT knowledge. Cross-cultural organizations have boosted the need for multilingual employees and a workforce that can adapt to the multicultural organizational environment. This paper identified and discussed needs, drivers and organizational practices to promote workforce agility.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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