

CAUCE Research Fund Final Project Report

Measuring GTA Employer Expectations of Continuing Education Programming in Nurturing Employee Agility

Project Report Prepared and Submitted by:

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Measuring GTA Employer Expectations of Continuing Education Programming in Nurturing Employee Agility

Organizations, and their environments, are evolving at an ever-increasing pace. A fourth industrial revolution (i.e. Industry 4.0) has resulted in a movement from basic automated production and systems to highly networked and advanced technologies that share data in completing tasks in a highly autonomous manner. COVID-19 has been further sped up the transformation of many human activities from physical to digital spaces. Organizations that wish to thrive, or even survive, are required to change with this rapid transformation.

Successful organizations have traditionally found their competitive advantage and consistently leverage it. As the world changes more quickly, competitive advantage becomes less static and results in organizations having to find a provisional advantage. What allows the organization to thrive today may result in its demise tomorrow. The successful organization must not just respond to environmental stimuli to stay relevant and competitive: it must anticipate it.

Likewise, the rapid pace of technological change impacts which employee skills are in-demand. While occupationally specific skills and knowledge have traditionally been slow to change, nowadays the shelf life of these skills have been substantially shortened. Instead, this now increases the need for *transversal*, or “cross-functional,” skills that allow employees to adapt and change with technology. Employees have need to be curious, reflexive, adaptable, and oriented to growth. They must be *agile*.

Continuing education (CE) departments that embed transversal skills into curriculum should consider agility as a skillset that will better prepare employees for the future of work. This research explores the beliefs and expectations that Greater Toronto Area (GTA) employers have on the importance of agility: both for their respective organizations and employees. In doing so, this study describes the current state of desired and actual employee agility among GTA employers and to what degree these organizations have expectations of CE in supporting that agility.

Literature Review

This section summarizes the relevant literature regarding organizational agility, employee agility, why these concepts are important, and what role Canadian CE may have in supporting the development of this skillset among the Canadian workforce.

The concept of *organizational agility* is well researched, although there is a lack of consensus on how it ought to be conceptualized. Agility, in this context, is not a method but an attribute. Some understand organizational agility to be the demonstration of flexibility, routine and radical innovation, and productivity (Jackson & Johansson, 2003; Sharifi, Colquhoun, Barclay & Dann, 2001; Yusuf, Sarhadi & Gunasekaran, 1999). However, Chu and Smyrnios (2019) caution against including too many attributes to this concept and agility is primarily concerned with speed of response. Muduli and Pandya (2018) comprise organizational agility to be of speed and effectiveness. Others consider organizational agility to be a combination of expedient and effective change that is rapid and proactive (Gunasekaran, 1999; Kidd, 1994).

It must be asked whether all organizations benefit from agility. Alavi and Wahab (2013) demonstrate that organizations can remain static if their environment is certain and stable. These organizations have benefited by finding a competitive advantage and consistently leveraging it. Yet, Holbeche (2019) writes that “organizational change is becoming broad-based, system-wide, fast-paced, and with unpredictable outcomes because of constant turbulence” (p.668). In such environments, the strategy of finding competitive advantage is dwindling (D’Aveni, 1994) in use and value. D’Aveni, Dagnino and Smith (2010) point to the emergence of *temporary advantage* in what is an increasingly volatile and disrupted environment, and that companies require a “multiplicity of strategies” (p.1382) that correspond with specific and separate rivals. These strategies for temporary advantage are managed through a process of “dynamic manoeuvring” (D’Aveni et al., 2010, p.1372).

Dynamic manoeuvring must be done with speed and effectiveness. As the rate of political, economic, social, and technological change increases organizations are forced to improve their agility (Foster & Kaplan, 2001; Wingard, 2015). Dyer and Ericksen (2006) point out that an agile organization will have scalability of its workforce: alignment and fluidity of its people for the activities of the organization. Worley, Williams and Lawler (2014) highlight organizational agility as a deciding factor in their examination of businesses that succeed or fail. None of this is to say, however, that successful organizations do not require structure alongside their agility. Dyer and Erickson (2006) write, in their examination of marketplace agility of organizations, that while workplace fluidity is important for speed and effectiveness of evolutions to maintain a synchronicity with the market, an effective human resources strategy will offer principles to support a balance of workplace fluidity and alignment or structure.

Yet, while an organization may be keen to be successful it might not be natural to be agile. Organizations sometimes struggle to renew themselves due to “cultural lock-in,” which is the “inability to change the corporate culture even in the face of clear market threats.” (Foster & Kaplan, 2001, p.16). The culture of the organization must be conducive to agility. An organization cannot be agile without having employees that are both knowledgeable and skilful in their work (Dove, 1993; Forsythe, 1997; Plonka, 1997). These employees must possess *employee agility*.

Employee agility is defined and conceptualized in different ways. Doeze Jager-van Vliet, Born and van der Molen (2019) define the agile employee as one who is “energetic, flexible, and adaptable.” (p.39) Van Vliet et al. (2019) also summarize the literature on employee agility as providing seven constructs (Breu, Hemingway, Strathern, & Bridger, 2002; Gunasekaran, 1999; Sherehiy and Karwowski, 2014): resilience, teamwork, coping with change, decisiveness, eagerness to learn, independence, and courage. Doeze and van Vliet (2019) also add that employee agility consists of “readiness for change, and proactive personality.” (p.41) Breu et al. (2002) reduce employee agility to being a combination of flexibility and speed, with speed as the more important factor of the two.

Employee agility is positively correlated with navigating through uncertainty and that it requires the nurturing of a mind-shift from adversity or fear of change to engaging change for new opportunity and skills growth (Braun, Hayes, Frautschy, Taran, 2017; Mooghali, Ghorbani, & Emami, 2016). Further, employee agility is positively and significantly correlated with performance in unfamiliar scenarios (Eichinger and Lombardo, 2004; Lombardo and Eichinger, 2000). The authors suggest that employers use agility as a predictor of later performance.

Lastly, it is important to identify where employees are expected to develop or further strengthen their agility. A workforce will typically upgrade its skill and knowledge through one of two means: formal learning (i.e. structured educational programming), and informal learning (i.e. workplace, “on-the-job”). Formal learning is more generalized and prefabricated, while informal learning is more specialized and tailored to specific workplace goals and related tasks. Dostie (2017) finds that both forms of learning play an integral role in workforce training and development, but only the latter directly affects workplace productivity and innovation. The emphasis that organizations place on formal versus informal training will vary, and likewise the resulting improvements to productivity (Black and Lynch, 1996; Barrett and O’Connel, 2001; Zwick, 2005; Dostie, 2013; as seen in Dostie, 2017).

There may be differences in expectations between employers and employees on the most suitable source of relevant workplace learning. Fulcher (2012) suggests that, while students expect their university programs to be industry-connected and be aligned with career aspirations, employers do not respond in kind. Instead, employers may prefer that students spend more time learning in the field and outside of the classroom.

All of higher education, including CE, is not immune to the need to be agile—quite the contrary. Gleason (2018) suggests that Industry 4.0 will have profound implications on curriculum design, given that “the shelf life of any skill in the present-day environment has become increasingly short” (Penprase, 2018). Penprase also notes that each of the previous industrial revolutions have influenced the higher education system. If Canada is where “most adults pursue further education and training for work-related reasons” (Statistics Canada, 2001, p. 50), and Canadian CE publicly conveys its role as one of supporting

professional and personal goals of learners through skills and knowledge development (McLean, 2007), then CE departments that incorporate transversal skills into their curriculum should give serious consideration to agility as a requisite set of skills in preparing their students for the future of work.

It is expected that the demand will continue to grow for employees who promote their agility through the acquisition of transversal skills and an overall engagement in lifelong learning (Gleason, 2018; Coady, 2016). While it is believed that agile organizations and employees thrive in rapidly changing environments, it is not clear if employers are aware of this. Likewise, the literature does not address what expectations that employers may have on employee possession of agility as a skill, as well as what forms of learning would be most appropriate for nurturing the development and growth of this skill.

Research Questions

Research on agility as an organizational and team trait, as well as its impact on outcomes achievement and success, is substantial. There also is literature on how agility of the employee is an important transversal skill for success in the future of work. However, the research is limited on how evident this is to employers. Further, the literature on what expectations employers may have of CE in promoting the development of this skill is even more limited.

In attempting to address this gap in the literature, this study seeks to answer:

1. To what degree do GTA employers value an “agile” workforce and organization?
2. To what degree do GTA employers expect their employees to be “agile”?
3. To what degree do GTA employers believe their environment is conducive to nurturing employee agility?
4. To what degree do GTA employers have expectations of CE programming, and specifically in facilitating the development of agility in prospective and current employees?

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was employed for this research, including a quantitative survey informed by literature and semi-structured qualitative interviews. Mixed methods studies involve the use of both quantitative and qualitative procedures to construct a complete picture and deeper understanding of the topic being studied (Johnson, 2006). Stronger evidence can be achieved through convergence and corroboration of findings (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A mixed methods approach was most appropriate for the present study because limited research is available on the topic of study and this approach would yield a rich set of insights about the topic.

The study is cross-sectional because the study was conducted within a specified time period. The population for this study consists of organizations in the GTA. The first step in quantitative data collection was the design of the survey. The survey questionnaire developed for this study borrows from the previously mentioned literature in conceptualizing concepts of “organizational agility,” “employee agility,” as well as the factors that influence interest in, and presence of, these two forms of agility.

The survey contained a total of 35 questions in both multiple-choice and short answer formats. Participants provided general descriptive information on themselves and their organization and answered questions on expectations of their employees, environment, organizational culture, consistency, and the role of CE using a five-point Likert scale based on their experiences and expectations. For the qualitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted online using a video-conferencing tool. Interviewees sent signed copies of their letter of consent back to the research team before beginning the online interview. Raw responses were then coded using NVivo for thematic analysis.

Findings

The 21 participants for this study represent organizations of varying workforce sizes (\bar{x} =80, max=2500, min=2), across 17 different North American Industry Classification System sector codes. Most participants

have executive-level authority over human resources-related decisions of their organization. Those participants that indicated they do not have this authority are in mid to senior management roles in human resources or operations. All participants indicated that their organization believes that their industry is constantly changing and that “successful businesses must change quickly and effectively.” Ninety-five percent of participants recognized the need for continuous internal change for success. Conversely, only 10% identify the need to use “temporary advantage” in driving organizational decisions and 90% believe that “finding competitive advantage and maintaining focus on it” drives their organizational decision-making.

While organizations may value principles of organizational agility, the ability to practice agility is more tempered. One-half of participants believe their organizations have a strong process in place to “address and adapt to external change” and 31% describe their organization as “static and rigid”. Likewise, only 55% indicate that their organization is stable and structured to support efficiency and effectiveness. The structure that organizations seek varies for when they are weathering a volatile environment: 47% believe success is derived from “standardizing the operating procedures in unfamiliar scenarios before team or individual action” whereas 53% place more importance on teams and individuals performing well in unfamiliar scenarios.

When asked about employer expectations, agility-related transversal skills were weighted heavily and with a statistically insignificant difference between the need for senior-leaders and other employees to have such skills. Only 2 participants indicate “lifelong learning” and “proactivity” as not being important skills to possess. Just as only some organizations are set up with processes to support organizational agility, the same is true regarding processes to nurture and develop agility among the workforce: 41% of participants indicate they have a strong process in place to support learning and development of employees. While these organizations have a keen ability to nurture agility-related skills of “autonomy” and “collaboration” among employees, just 35% believe they nurture a “growth mindset” and “lifelong learning.” However, all participants believe that “continuous change/growth is essential” for “organization success” as well as for employee “career success.”

Lastly, participants provided thoughts on what group or groups have a role to play in the ongoing development of prospective and current employees. Most participants indicate that employees need transversal skills to succeed, that universities and colleges are places to incubate these skills among prospective employees, and that organizations must work with each other, as well as higher and continuing education, to support workforce development. However, only 47% believe that “universities and colleges are places that should develop the transversal skills of our current employees.” Participants indicate “interactive workshops” and “webinars” as being most useful and relevant to their training purposes, while finding full programs and conferences/summits as least relevant.

The quantitative research is also supported by qualitative data from 4 semi-structured interviews. Participant interviewees conceptualize organizational agility in a way that is compatible with the literature, and three components of organizational agility emerged: adaptability, speed, and internal stability. Interview participants further explained the relationship between agility and stability. Most participants identify that these two concepts are married by maintained values and results, with one adding that organizations should find stable agility through the “why” and that “we need to be very flexible on the *how*” and another adding that they search for ways to “produce our products and interact with our consumers in a more agile manner” that they also maintain stability in the business-consumer relationship through “stability and security” in any new initiative so that “we ensure the same experience for all clients.”

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was raised across each of the interviews. While some participants indicate that the pandemic has fundamentally impacted their organization, others indicate it has had less impact on their core business. For both pre-pandemic and pandemic times, participants indicate interest and concern in employee well-being and experience. For these organizations, the pandemic has led to a medium change from in-person to digital events and communication.

Lessons regarding organizational and employee agility have been learned by these organizations through the pandemic as well. Interviewees cite the need to be “competitive” and “resilient” through embracing

change and the continual upskilling of employees. All participants refer to a need for employees to continue learning, and most participants describing learning as a lifelong process and that employees need to expect and embrace change.

Discussion

GTA employers who participated in this study value many of the principles and skills required for an agile workforce (i.e. employee agility) and organization. Participants of the study ascribe to the Alavi & Wahab (2013) framework, at least in terms of their beliefs, that successful businesses must undergo constant change in rapidly changing industries. Their beliefs in organizational agility are almost matched by a similar degree of value placed on traits related to employee agility, such as autonomy and collaboration.

As a seeming contradiction, most organizations also continue to believe that “competitive advantage” should be leveraged despite the constantly changing environment. This runs contrary to the suggestion by D’Aveni et al. (2010) that such a state requires “dynamic maneuvering” through the continual and iterative process of seizing “temporary advantage.” The disconnect between participant appreciation for agility, while still assigning high value to competitive advantage and standardized processes, may be evidence of the “cultural lock-in” described by Foster and Kaplan (2001). Nearly half of participants describe their organization as “static and rigid.”

This potential state of cultural lock-in extends beyond faith in maintaining one’s competitive advantage. Despite the value that participants place on employee agility, and demonstrated concern for employees consistently conveyed in interviews, many organizations do not have the processes in place to adequately nurture learning and development of employees. Nurturing the agility of employees is also challenged, in many organizations, by what is perceived by them as a lack of structure and process. Having said this, it is abundantly clear from the interviews that organizations place a heavy importance on the employee’s ability to expect and embrace change. Likewise, organizations see lifelong learning as one means of supporting this change. Ongoing development of employees and the organization is seen as essential by participants.

Organizations also highlight the need for universities and colleges to be places that develop the agility-related transversal skills of both current employees, and even more so on prospective employees. While only 3 organizations had an ongoing partnership with an educational institution to better prepare students to join their workforce, all participants stressed the need for organizations to work with universities and colleges to support skills development of the workforce. This shows the high expectations GTA employers have of CE programming, and specifically in facilitating the development of agility in prospective and current employees by fostering transversal skills.

Employers see higher education as having an important role in creating an agile workforce by providing a means to continuously upskill. Short courses are a great way to upskill and help keep employees agile in today's fast-paced world. In the interviews, it was also found that employees value CE especially for interactive workshops that are offered online, since they can take them remotely while continuing work during regular hours. Conversely, many participants challenged the notion of CE being an appropriate venue for longer programs and courses.

As it is expected that the demand will continue to grow for employees who promote their agility through the acquisition of transversal skills and an overall engagement in lifelong learning (Gleason, 2018; Coady, 2016), it is unclear what shape this will evolve to take with continuing education. While participants view colleges and universities as skill incubators of prospective employees, they are less inclined to see this as an incubator for current employees through programs and courses but more so through workshops and webinars.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the participating GTA employers in this study value employee agility: not just as an ideal, but as an important skill for employees to possess. Employers likewise see their

environment as constantly changing, and that they must maintain pace with this change. However, it is unclear if employers expect their employees to be central to this change. While they view change and growth of employees as essential to organizational success, they also seek security in processes over people while encountering unfamiliar scenarios. As the rate of change continues to increase across most industries, the researchers of this study expect that standardized processes may become less a place of safe refuge. However, participant responses to this item appear to reflect their past experiences on how well teams perform in unfamiliar scenarios.

Employers have real expectations on colleges and universities alike as it relates to skills development. The research shows that participating GTA employers expect colleges and universities as an incubator of skills development for *future* hires, but fewer employers see these institutions and CE as obvious incubators for development of their current employees. If an employer is to see CE as an appropriate source of employee development, it is more so in the form of workshops and webinars than it is in programs and courses.

In closing, CE must ask itself why it is that less than half of the organizations who participated in this study see colleges and universities as an appropriate destination for skills development. One can speculate that this is another form of “cultural lock-in,” in that employers wish to train in-house and view educational programs as traditionally disconnected from their unique needs. If so, CE can change this.

Continuing education, and higher education more broadly, is and should be concerned about connections between its professional programming and the professions those programs serve. In many cases this involves core occupational or technical skills. But as the shelf life of those skills is reduced due to the ever-increasing rate of technological and social change, transversal skills gain further importance in ongoing professional success. While agility is not the panacea for rapid expiration of occupationally specific core skills, it is a skillset that has an increasing impact on the ability for employees, and their organizations, to maintain relevance and viability in the future of work.

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