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**Research Report**

## Fast and flexible: Corporate communications in agile organizations

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## ***COMMUNICATION INSIGHTS***

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# **FAST AND FLEXIBLE**

Corporate communications in  
agile organizations



**ACADEMIC SOCIETY**  
FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

An initiative of the Günter Thiele Foundation

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**Note:** Throughout this publication, gender-specific terms may be used in order to ease the text flow. It should be understood as referring to both genders, unless explicitly stated.



*» MAKE SURE TO  
BE IN THE DRIVER'S  
SEAT WHEN YOUR  
CORPORATION  
TURNS AGILE. «*

## EDITORIAL

Traditional ways of organizing corporations are fundamentally challenged by the digital transformation. New strategies, structures, and processes are necessary to keep pace with the high volatility of stakeholder demands and new competitors. A keyword and concept often used in this debate is “agility” – meaning smarter, faster and more flexible ways of running a business.

Despite its omnipresence in business practice, research on agility in the domain of corporate communications has been very scarce. This publication addresses the question of how corporations and their communication departments deal with the implications of an increasingly dynamic environment – a setting that demands flexible structures and processes as well as a new culture and mindset. Some companies like Deutsche Telekom, OTTO Group, ING-DiBa or B. Braun have moved forward and reorganized their communication teams or processes. Others are considering to move into that direction, and there will also be companies where such settings are not useful today. Nevertheless, a thorough knowledge about the topic is a must for every communication leader today.

Agile organizations provide a triple challenge for corporate communications departments: On the one hand, they need to become more agile themselves, just like any other department, and have to adapt their own structures and processes accordingly. On the other hand, they play a dual role in enhancing organizational agility. They are in charge of communicating the agile transformation internally by creating a new corporate culture. Externally, communications must shape an agile image of the company. Moreover, they can support and enable other parts of the organization to engage in more agile ways of working.

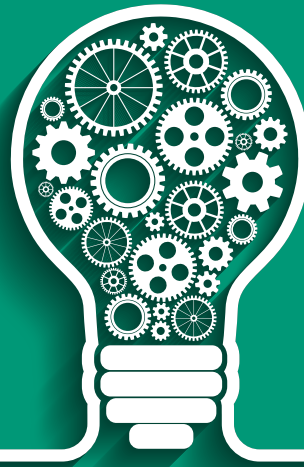
Since many companies are struggling with these challenges, a research team at Leipzig University headed by Dr. Lisa Dühring and myself set out to address this challenge. Our findings are based on an extensive literature review, interviews with 38 multinational companies and case studies of leading corporate communications teams who have provided insights on how they approach this topic. Many thanks go to Karen Berger and Jana Brockhaus for their essential support and all practitioners that devoted time and energy to the in-depth interviews and case studies.

The study is part of the larger research project “Corporate communications in agile organizations” conducted by the Universities of Leipzig, Münster and Vienna. This project explores different aspects of agile communication, including internal structures and processes, collaboration with consultancies and service providers, and content management.

We hope you will benefit from reading this issue of Communication Insights.

**Dr. Ansgar Zerfass**

Professor and Chair of Strategic Communication,  
Leipzig University, Germany



# CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS IN AGILE ORGANIZATIONS: KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ **Objective:** Agility and the related transformation of organizational structures, processes, culture and people are highly relevant for communication departments. This is why this research project by the Academic Society set out to explore the phenomenon of organizational agility and what it means for corporate communications. It provides a general introduction to the trend, the challenges of agility, and the role of corporate communications.
- ▶ **Internal and external drivers:** The transformation is driven by technological shifts, new market demands as well as changing expectations and regulations within the social and political environment. (p. 7-8)
- ▶ **Four dimensions:** Agility can be conceptualized around four dimensions (= capabilities of agile organizations): (1) responsiveness: the ability to react proactively to a changing environment; (2) performance: the effective and efficient use of resources and personnel; (3) flexibility/adaptivity: implementation of flexible structures and processes suited to the immediate tasks at hand; and (4) speed: the ability to finish tasks as quickly as possible. (p. 9)
- ▶ **Role of communications:** Agile organizations provide a triple challenge for communication departments: 1) they need to adopt their own structures and processes accordingly; 2) they enhance organizational agility by enabling other departments; 3) they communicate the agile transformation internally by creating a new corporate culture, and externally by shaping an agile image of the company. (p. 12)
- ▶ **Agile departments:** To become an agile organization or an agile department, six factors (= providers) have to be aligned: structures and processes, culture and people, as well as tools and technologies. (p. 10-11)
- ▶ **Structures & processes:** Among these factors, restructuring the department, creating flatter hierarchies and establishing new processes are probably the most far-reaching steps that bring consequences for the whole team. (p. 13-14)
- ▶ **Culture & people:** Changing people's mindset and creating a new corporate culture are generally considered to be the most important levers. Organizations need a corporate culture of sharing and openness that encourages and empowers employees to engage in agile ways of working and trusts them to do so. (p. 15-17)
- ▶ **Leadership:** Agility also requires organizations to embrace a new leadership style – one that is less anchored in hierarchies, departmental power structures, or personal influence, but strongly linked to project or team leadership with the aim of enabling employees to make their own decisions. (p. 17-18)
- ▶ **Tools & technologies:** Last but certainly not least, agile tools and technologies form the basis for a new way of collaboration and offer support to teams in their endeavour to become more agile. (p. 18-24)
- ▶ **Outlook:** In summary, driving agility holds much potential for communication departments to strengthen their role within the organization and act as an example for other departments. (p. 29-30)

## METHODOLOGY

This *Communication Insights* presents the first findings of a three year research project on agility in corporate communications. It is based on the first phase of the project (2017- 2018) that included:

- 1 A systematic **literature review** across various disciplines through which we gained a comprehensive understanding of the concept of agility and its key dimensions.
- 2 The analysis of several conceptual **agility frameworks** and the synthesis of relevant aspects for communication management.
- 3 **Thirty-eight in-depth interviews** with chief communication officers and senior communication managers from multinational companies between January and March 2018. They provided insights into the impact of agility on corporations and communication departments today. The companies came from diverse industries (e.g. manufacturing, automotive, insurance, finance, healthcare, pharma) and together represent more than three million employees. They were grouped into three categories: medium-sized companies (< €5 billion annual revenue), large-sized companies (€5-20 billion annual revenue) and very large-sized companies (> €20 billion annual revenue). Thirteen of the interviewees work for medium companies, nine for large companies, and sixteen for very large companies.
- 4 First **case studies** in selected communication departments that were conducted between August and September 2018 to gain further insights into the practices of coping with agility in communication departments.

The interviewees were selected based on their high professional status and expertise, their longtime experience in corporate communications, their strategic view on the topic, and their proximity to top management.

In the **further course of the research project**, we will conduct about a dozen case studies in selected communication departments that have a diverse range of experience with working in agile structures or processes and with agile tools. The case studies will give us the opportunity to further delve into some aspects of agility such as leadership, talent management, corporate culture, or cross-departmental collaboration. In addition, other topics will be addressed by related research projects by the universities of Münster and Vienna (see p. 33). These findings will be published in upcoming *Communication Insights* in 2019 and 2020.

### Companies that participated in the study



Thirty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted with chief communication officers and senior communication managers from multinational companies to discuss the impact of agility on corporations and their communication departments.



# WHY ORGANIZATIONS HAVE TO BECOME MORE AGILE

## CONCEPTS AND DRIVERS OF AGILITY AND THEIR EFFECTS ON ORGANIZATIONS

*A complex environment, intense global competition, an accelerated rate of innovative change, and new competitors put more pressure on organizations than ever before. Especially large corporations that are traditionally governed through hierarchical structures struggle with these developments. The digital transformation forces many industries and businesses to address major adaptations in the domains of strategy, structure, product development, and service delivery. Agility is one of the key concepts that enables corporations to address these challenges. This chapter will help to understand the transformation organizations are undergoing today.*

### What is an agile organization?

Since agility entered the business agenda about a decade ago, its buzz has yet to decline. On the contrary, it has become one of the most-discussed business concepts of our time. Hardly a day has passed without the publication of a new report on the growing importance of agility and diverse strategies to become more agile. Agility means that an organization should become significantly faster, more flexible, and more responsive – either by establishing new ways of planning (Design Thinking, Scrum), organizing (flexible teams, flatter hierarchies, horizontal structures), or more collaborative stakeholder interaction.

While most ideas behind the concept are not new, agility has nevertheless gained a lot of attention in recent years. The main reason for this current impetus is the combination of external developments, especially technological shifts, market demands, and societal changes. Organizations find that their current traditional set-up makes them too slow and ineffective; they often cannot adapt quickly enough to changing circumstances.

The **traditional organization** (designed primarily for stability) is based on vertical structures with clear hierarchies and clear

responsibilities. Goals and decisions filter down from the top management. It operates through linear planning and control in order to capture value for shareholders. Structures are strong, but often rigid and inflexible.

In contrast, an **agile organization** (designed for both stability and dynamism) is based on a network of teams with a people-centered culture. It operates based on rapid learning and fast decision cycles, which are supported by technology. Agile organizations are guided by a powerful common purpose to co-create value for all stakeholders. Such an agile operating model helps to reconfigure strategy, structure, processes, people, and technology quickly and efficiently towards value-creating and value-protecting. An agile organization thus adds velocity and adaptability to stability. It creates a competitive advantage in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions.

However, one should also keep in mind that agility fits neither every task nor every situation. Certain fields that are less prone to agility, such as investor relations, compliance and risk communication, are mostly areas where a one-voice-policy and a clear chain of command are essential.

## Where does the concept come from?

The problem of how organizations can successfully deal with complex, unpredictable, dynamic, and constantly changing environments – today described as ‘VUCA world’ (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014) – has been a prevailing topic both in industry and academia for decades. Agility, although a buzzword and current management trend (Cram & Newell, 2016), is not necessarily a new concept or a new phenomenon (e.g. Sherehiy et al., 2007; Klein, 2017). As early as the 1920s and especially in the 1960s, management researchers started to develop concepts about how organizations deal with increasingly volatile environments.

The more specific concept and term of ‘agility’ was proposed in the 1990s by researchers at Lehigh University, Pennsylvania.

Originally, it focused on agile manufacturing. The term and concept were later adopted by researchers in the fields of production and supply chain management, production economics, software development, and information technology.

Agility really gained momentum when picked up by the software industry, where the concept is most commonly applied today. Soon, a variety of specific methods that operationalize the agile philosophy gained attention, such as Design Thinking, Scrum, or Kanban. These methods prescribe specific practices, including cross-functional teams, sprints, daily stand-up meetings, iterative processes, retrospective project evaluation, etc. (Maximini, 2015; Plattner et al., 2018, see page 18-24).

## What are external drivers of agility?

A turn towards corporate agility is usually triggered by changes in a company’s external environment. They represent a source of potential opportunities but also threats. From our interviews and the literature review (e.g. Vasquez-Bustelo et al., 2007; Tseng & Lin, 2011) we identified three main drivers for agility in organizations:

- ▶ **Technological shifts:** These refer to the overall digital transformation of work and life. Digital technologies transform all parts of the value chain. Accelerated and altered development cycles for new products and technologies require organizations to become more flexible and faster. Businesses and industries are being commoditized or replaced through digitization and automation. Key words representing these developments are machine learning, the Internet of Things, and robotics.
- ▶ **Market demands:** Rapidly changing markets, increasing cost pressure, and intensified international competition require corporations to adapt their market portfolios. Furthermore, the expectations of customers regarding customization, quality, and delivery times are rising. This intensifies the pressure on corporations to meet individual needs instead of

## DEFINING AGILITY

There are many definitions and conceptualizations of agility. This sometimes makes it difficult to grasp the essence of the concept. We propose the following definition of agility that has guided our research:

*Agility is the **overall capability** of an organization to respond to and take advantage of the changes initiated by the drivers in the internal and external environments. It includes the **ability to identify relevant changes** and to **respond proactively, efficiently and effectively**, employing the **right***

***personnel** based on competence, not hierarchical status. Additionally, it includes the ability to **implement flexible structures and processes** suited to the immediate tasks at hand and to **employ the appropriate resources** in the shortest possible time.*



mass production. New competitors, some of them start-ups and entrepreneurs, are often smaller and faster. Market volatility is increasing due to growth in the market niche. Last but not least, investors demand growth and financial success, which often leads to acquisitions and subsequent needs for restructuring.

- **Societal and political changes:** Employees belonging to the much-acclaimed generations Y and Z have different expectations for their career than previous generations. They want to take on responsibility for their own projects very soon and prefer to work in teams. For many, taking leadership positions is no longer a top priority. Flexible working structures, which are common in agile organizations, fit their expectations better than hierarchical set-ups. Apart from this, unstable and complex political environments and stronger regulations put pressure on companies. Examples can be found in the areas of data protection, environmental protection, compliance, and diversity.

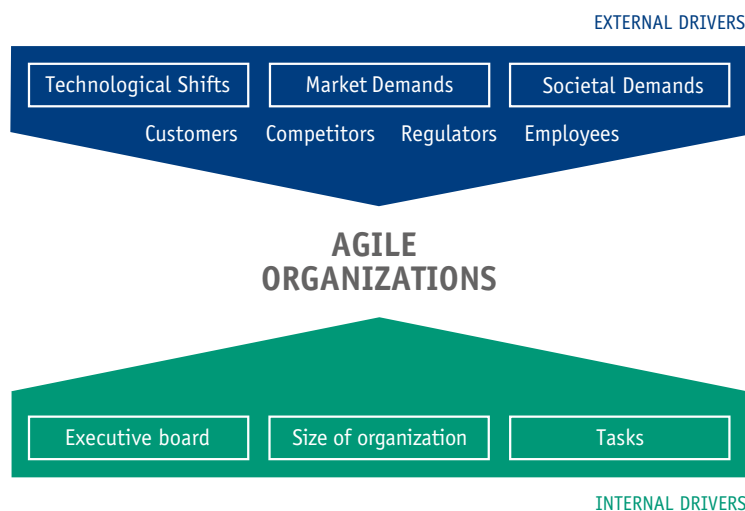
These drivers have an impact on the relationship between corporations and their stakeholders. A complex set of expectations is created and has to be taken care of. There has been a general shift in mindsets from an environment of scarcity to recognizing the abundance of opportunities to satisfy the need for individualization. Organizations need to be highly customer-focused and should seek to meet the customer's diverse needs. In the end, organizational success will depend on how much value a company can co-create for all their stakeholders (i.e. customers, employees, investors, partners, and communities).

## Which internal factors drive or impede transformation?

Several internal factors are decisive for supporting or impeding the transformation towards agility:

- The most important factor is the **role of the top management**. A management board will only amend the corporate strategy and the organizational set-up if it believes in the advantages of agile structures. This can stimulate radical changes in organizational design or corporate culture, for instance. Likewise, lack of support is still one of the largest impediments to organizational transformation. It is very difficult to establish agile structures and processes against the wishes of the top executives.
- Another factor is the **size of the organisation**. It is easier for smaller organizations, such as start-ups, to implement agile ways of working. At the same time, many very large corporations are rethinking their current traditional organizational set-up and processes. They are the ones who feel the growing competition from smaller and more flexible suppliers the most. So far, medium-sized companies are the least concerned with agile restructuring.
- As mentioned, not all **types of businesses or tasks** within an organization are suitable for agile working. Activities such as accounting, investor relations or handling legal issues work better with clear chains of command and responsibility.

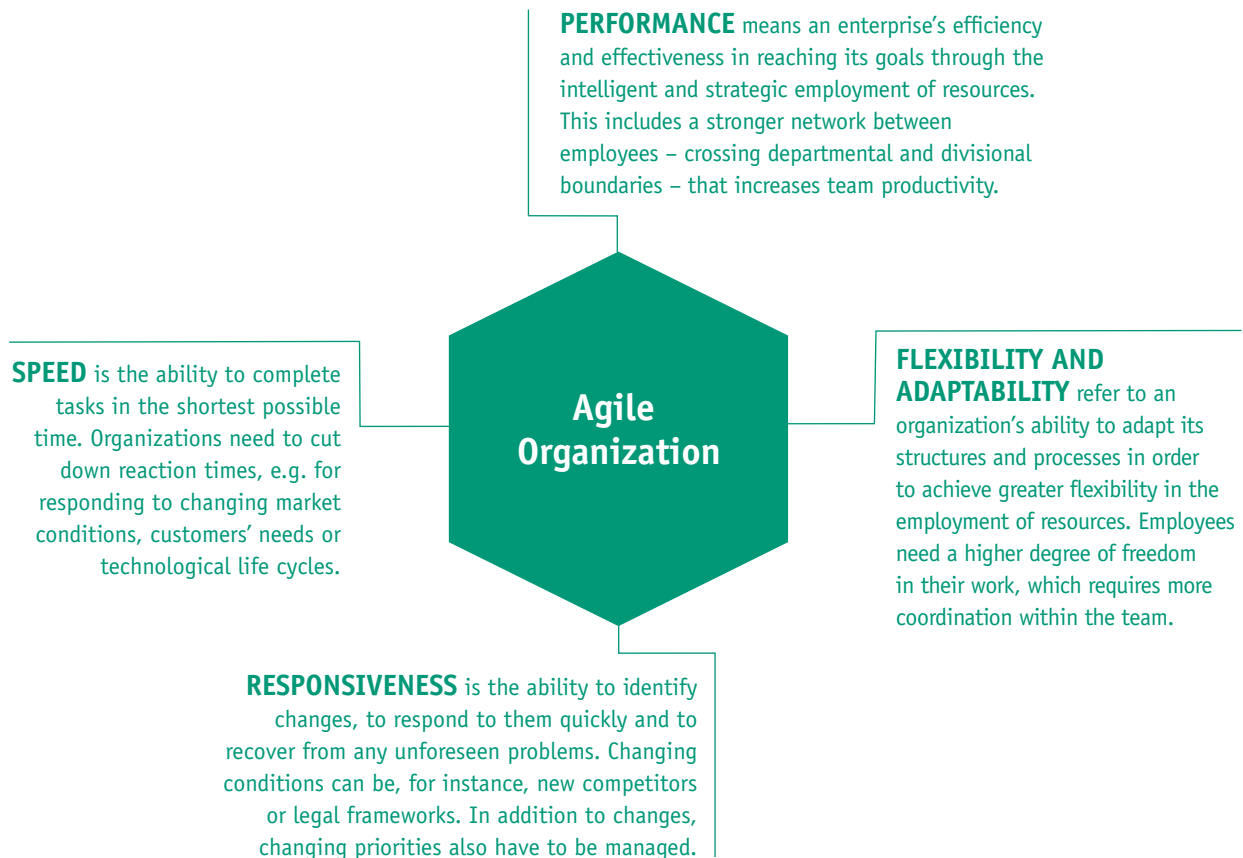
## Internal and external drivers of agility



Several internal and external factors drive the organizational transformation towards agility. They in turn have an impact on the relationship between corporations and their stakeholders.

## Which capabilities do organizations need to react to changing environments?

Agile enterprises have to adapt quickly to changes within their business environment. To do so, they require four capabilities: performance, flexibility/adaptability, responsiveness, and speed (e.g. Aghina et al., 2018; Tseng & Lin, 2011; Yusuf et al., 1999). However, research shows that aside from speed and flexibility, stability is also a significant catalyst for organizational performance. Agile organizations master the paradox – they are both stable and dynamic at the same time.



### AT A GLANCE

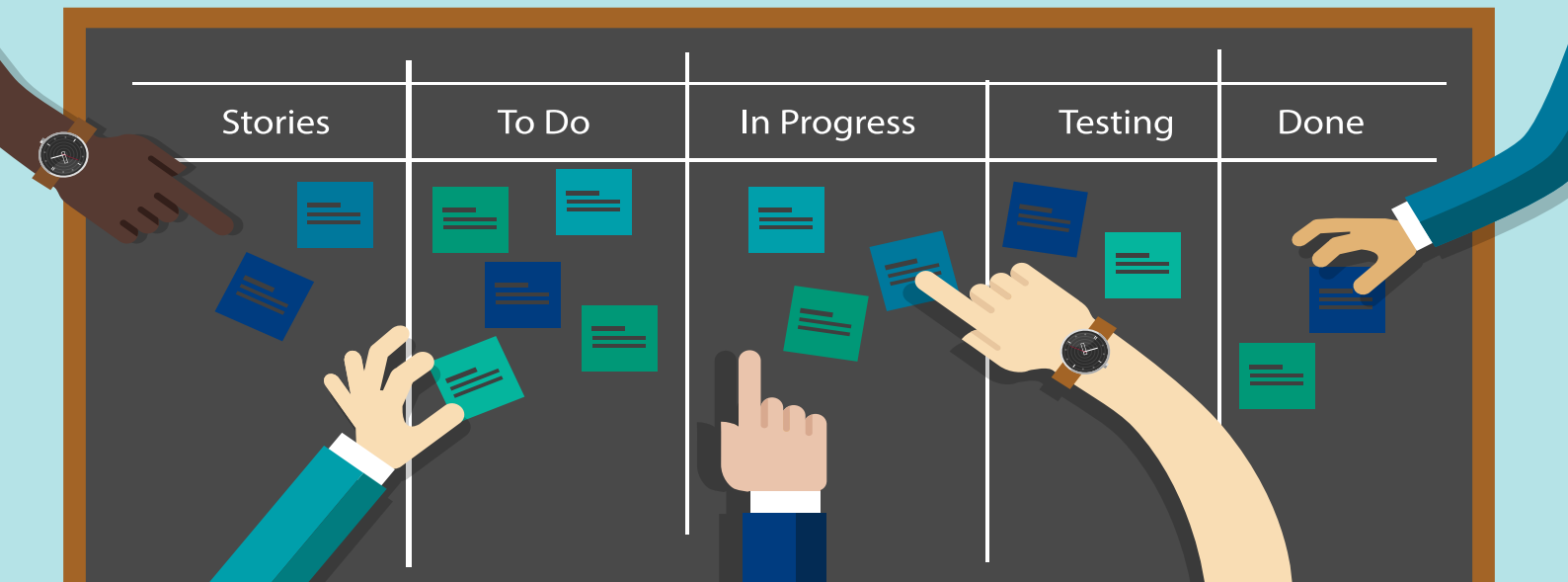
- The increasing dynamics of corporate environments in the VUCA world have placed more emphasis on agility.
- Technological shifts, new market demands, and political and societal changes are drivers of agility in organizations.
- These factors require organizations to become more responsive to changes, to speed up their processes, adapt structures and employ resources more efficiently and effectively.
- The extent to which a corporation can implement agile ways of working depends on the support of the top management, the size of the organization and the type of business.
- Agility is likely to have a strong impact on communication departments. However, most of them still struggle with how to cope with the challenges this presents.



### FURTHER READINGS

Kotter, J. B. (2014). *Accelerate. Building strategic agility for a faster-moving world*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

McKinsey (2018). *Agile organizations*. [www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/agile-organizations](https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/agile-organizations).



# LEADING THE AGILE TRANSFORMATION

## HOW COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS CAN BECOME MORE AGILE

*As an organizational function that is deeply affected by all changes in the external and internal environment of an organization, corporate communications has recently been forced to cope with the challenges associated with agility – not only as a driver of the topic but also because it is simultaneously driven by its implications. The communication department can play a central role in the transformation of an organization into a more agile entity. This demands a different set-up of communication departments as well as new competencies from the people working within them. This chapter explores how communication departments adapt their own structures, processes and culture accordingly. The insights are based on in-depth interviews with 38 chief communication officers from large, multinational companies, complemented by case studies and an evaluation of existing interdisciplinary research on agility.*

### What is needed to establish an agile organization or department?

There are six major factors that provide an entire organization or a single department with the means to become more agile. Leaders need to align these factors when setting up agile structures. The next chapters will explore in more detail how a communication department can become agile itself and how it can help to build a more agile organization overall.

As the six factors, also referred to as agility providers, overlap to a certain extent, we have grouped them into three areas:

**1 Structures & Processes:** Agile structures and processes are an important prerequisite for flexibility and speed. Linear, bureaucratic structures with rigid chains of command tend to slow down decisions. Working in functional silos creates redundancies and a lack of information and transparency, meaning that inefficiency is a common result. Thus, agile

organizations work towards flatter hierarchies. They decentralize power, establish iterative decision-making processes and set up cross-functional teams.

**2 Culture & People:** Agile organizations come to life through the people working within them. Creating a different mindset and corporate culture are probably the most important providers of agility. Executives and team members alike require a new openness and willingness to work in cross-functional teams with a stronger emphasis on collaboration, interaction, and knowledge sharing. Incentives and career options need to be revised when leadership positions are dismantled.

**3 Tools & Technologies:** A number of agile methods and tools such as Scrum, Design Thinking or Kanban are helpful when working towards an agile organization. Furthermore, technologies such as digital collaboration tools and knowledge management platforms support agile working.

## Relevant dimensions of agile organizations and departments (agility providers)

### STRUCTURES

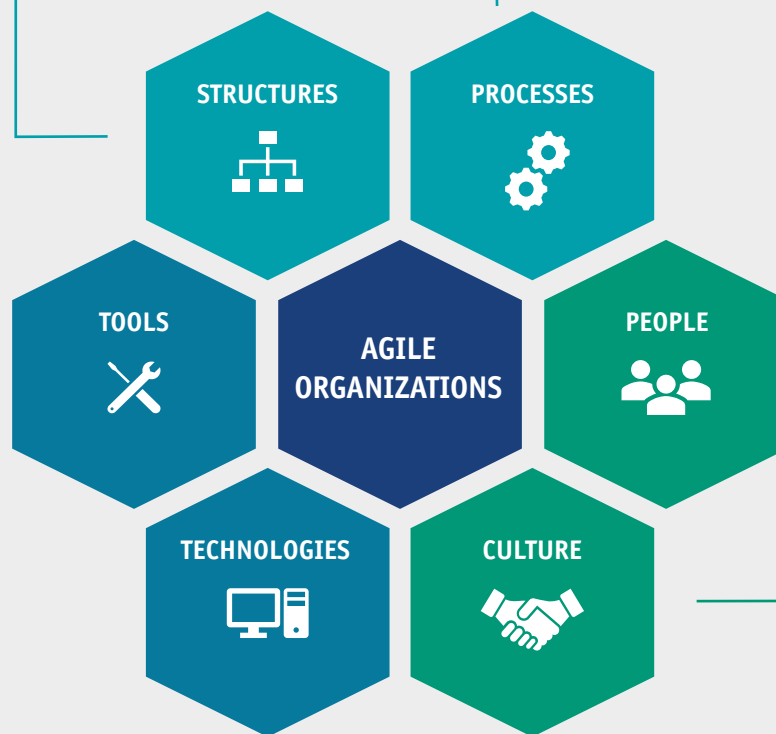
Agile organizations are based on a network of empowered teams – if needed these are supplemented by experts from different departments and are independent of hierarchies. Work is based on flat structures and task related roles. Hands-on governance and decentralization of power speed up decision making. This can (but must not) be supported by an open physical work space.

### PROCESSES

Quicker decision and learning cycles, for instance through rapid iteration and experimentation, help organizations to reach results more quickly. Standardized ways of working (e.g. with the help of agile tools) help to make these processes transparent and more efficient. Processes should incorporate regular feedback (retrospective) and knowledge sharing elements.

### PEOPLE

Executives and employees require a new mindset with an openness for collaboration, sharing and self-management. They need to be open to engage in interdisciplinary team work and enact a large number of different roles. This goes along with new competencies, often described as 'entrepreneurial drive'. Companies have to invest in continuous training and keep people motivated by new incentives and career options. Executives have to develop a new leadership style with a focus on encouraging followers to take over responsibility and support self-organization.



### TOOLS

A variety of agile working methods exist, including well-established tools such as Scrum, Kanban or Design Thinking. They prescribe elements and techniques to run projects in a more agile way.

### TECHNOLOGIES

Virtual digital collaboration and organization tools help flexible structures to come alive. Project management software and knowledge management platforms constitute the (mainly digital) technological backbone. They help to run projects with team members spread out in different locations, record insights, and store knowledge.

### CULTURE

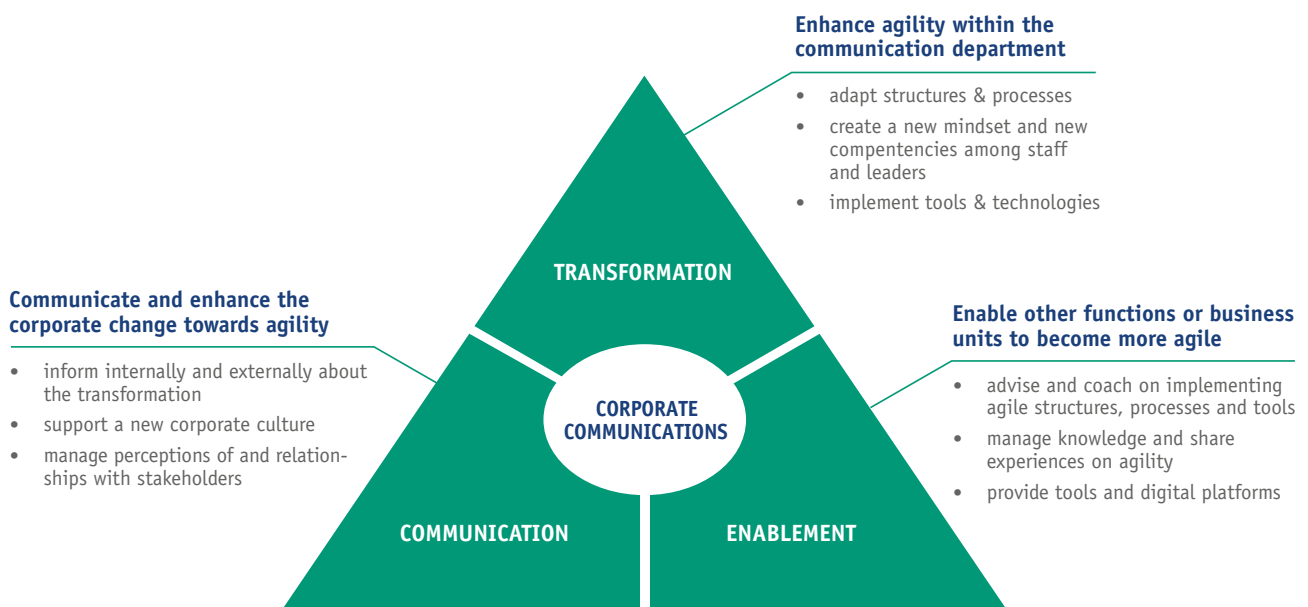
For agile initiatives to thrive, a strategic cultural change is needed based on collaboration and sharing. Enabling and empowering people are major success factors. At the same time, mistakes and risks need to be tolerated to a larger extent.

## Which roles do communication departments play in agile organizations?

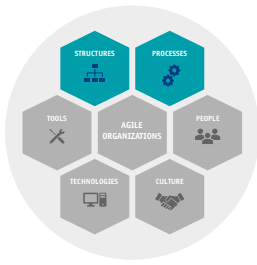
There are three overall tasks for communication departments in the context of agility:

- 1 Communication:** A core task of communications is to inform internal and external stakeholders about major changes in the strategy and organizational design. It is important to explain the necessity of said changes, provide roadmaps, cultivate positive images, and stimulate support. These tasks are not new or restricted to change projects aimed at agility, but our research shows that communication departments are nearly always involved when large change programs linked to digital transformation are initiated. Sometimes they even take the lead, and they often work closely with human resources. Conveying the spirit of agility and thus enhancing the corporate reputation can help to improve the internal appreciation of the communication department. Apart from the change process, it has to be noted that agile organizations place much emphasis on internal communications. This is necessary to support collaboration and flexible ways of co-working. As a consequence, the internal communications function will often be upgraded and gain in importance.
- 2 Enablement:** Communication departments carry a special responsibility for driving overall organizational agility by enabling other members of the corporation. They can support top management, business units and other departments, for instance by advising on implementing agile structures, processes, and tools. Our research reveals that communication departments often act as pilots that are among the first units to experiment with agile work. Communications professionals act as coaches and advisors when it comes to agility, which supports the overall trend in businesses to build up internal knowledge and expertise. Along this line, communication departments can provide tools and platforms to facilitate agility. This includes internal knowledge bases, intranets, or social collaboration tools.
- 3 Transformation:** The most challenging task is to transform the communication department itself. Just like other parts of the organization, communications are confronted with the challenge of utilizing their staff in more flexible ways, carrying out a growing number of tasks with the same resources, reacting more quickly to external and internal demands, and making processes more efficient. This requires a different culture of collaboration and a new mindset from everybody. Transforming their own department is the most pressing strategic issue for any chief communication officer (CCO) at the moment, as confirmed by our research.

## The triple role of communication departments in agile organizations



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# CREATING AGILE STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

Aligning structures and processes is one of the most important steps for communication departments aiming for more agility. Agile approaches are often a means to cope with the increasing speed of communication and with the limited resources of the department.

*» We all have our headcount targets, but there are more and more tasks and channels communications has to address. «*

*Silke Christiansen, Head of Strategic Planning and Monitoring, BASF SE*

The key question is how to deploy the people at hand most efficiently and effectively, but also in the most flexible way. A crucial factor in this regard is organizational design. Intra-organizational cooperation usually improves when lateral structures are in place. These enable people to work together across departments and across hierarchies. Thus, several of the communication departments in our sample have started to restructure their departmental design. They created flat hierarchies, abandoned former disciplinary structures, such as internal, external, corporate, and brand communications, and started interdisciplinary collaborations with other departments.

## Influences on the level of agility

The extent to which the organizations in our sample engaged in a redesign of structures and processes differed greatly from company to company.

The first important factor is the overall **size of the company** and the communication department: Very large companies in the sample (> €20 billion annual revenue) usually have communication departments staffed with 100 to 150 people. These companies – and their communication departments – have stuck to creating ‘islands of agility’. This means that they either dabbled with agile ways of working in substructures like innovation hubs, or they tried out agile elements in project structures with cross-functional teams. Also, projects involving other functions or business units such as setting up a new content management system and introducing a new corporate website together with IT, business units, online marketing, and external service providers are oftentimes set up and managed in more agile ways. These very large companies were most often dedicated to a sophisticated, corporate-wide change program. However, the introduction of agile ways of working was often initially driven by grass-roots initiatives. These were mostly small groups of managers or co-workers that were dissatisfied with the perceived ineffectiveness of the waterfall technique mostly used in large change

## Different Strategies to implement agility

### No agile structures

These companies do not address agility at all. They are mostly smaller, rather traditional companies that have not yet been hit by the digital transformation or have not yet seen the need for change.

### Islands of agility

These companies create substructures where they experiment with agile ways of working, e.g. in form of project organization, innovation hubs, swarms, special projects, etc.

► This is the most common type of company

### Radical restructuring

These companies make more radical changes towards agility at the structural level, e.g. restructuring of organizational or departmental designs, reduction or abolition of hierarchical levels, merging of sub-departments, etc.



*» That is the crucial difference between a project organization and a swarm: That you have to release people a hundred percent into the organization. In the beginning, executives are usually positively disposed towards that. But when they understand that one person is gone and they cannot access his or her skills and expertise anymore, conflicts arise. «*

*Dr. Michael Jochum, Head of Internal Communications & Crossmedia, Daimler AG*

programs (Clegg & Walsh, 2004; Rajlich, 2006). These smaller initiatives were, however, only successful in the long run when at some point they got the support of top management.

The second important factor is **top-management support for agile initiatives**. Although agile projects grew out of individual or small group initiatives in most companies, their long-term success can only be realized through executive orders. The companies in our sample that took the most radical approach in terms of complete organizational redesign were the ones for whom the strategy was prescribed by the board of executives. The reasons for this were different. Sometimes the major impetus was staff and cost reduction and the need to employ the personnel at hand more efficiently. Other times a new CEO was hired with experience in agile restructuring and the wish to try something new. But there were also CCOs in our sample that started the process of restructuring their own department without any pressure from the board. Still, here, too, it was important to get the support of the board at some point as communication departments cannot function as islands within a corporate structure that is completely different.

The majority of companies, however, are cautious about agility. They select only those elements and techniques that they perceive to be most valuable. In this **hybrid approach** firms still use vertical ways of organizing but complement them with agile approaches. Standard operations and daily business tasks are often addressed in the traditional manner. Special and corporate-wide projects, however, are often managed in a more agile way. This does not necessarily require the use of agile tools. Instead, different ways of leadership (competence beats hierarchy), cross-functional teams, as well as flexible and dynamic approaches towards organizing and evaluating work are established. At the moment, many companies rely on

**'trial-and-error'**, amending their practices on a project-by-project basis, while constantly experimenting with new ways of organizing work.

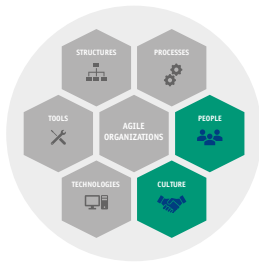
## Challenges of agile projects

Working in interdisciplinary project teams is also a challenge. Many interviewees confirmed that agile projects do not always run smoothly. It is a learning curve for everybody involved. Communicators have to develop a better understanding of the processes, products, and ways of working in other departments and business units. They have to refrain from acting as a corporate unit with governance power. Likewise, other business units have to understand the merits of communication professionals and accept them as valuable peers.

In order for different departments or organizational units to be willing to share information and collaborate with corporate communications, co-workers have to trust in the communicators' reliability, competence, and professionalism. Therefore, corporate communications departments should work towards **creating a positive internal reputation**. This ensures that other units will value the department and its practitioners as important partners. Reputation, trust, and a track record of good services are more relevant in agile organizations than set rules of communication governance.

The effectiveness of agile projects also depends on the **willingness of executives and staff** to make them come alive while also being prepared to make some concessions and sacrifices in this process. Many executives are of course reluctant to release their best people into agile structures like 'swarm organizations', innovation hubs, or start-ups.



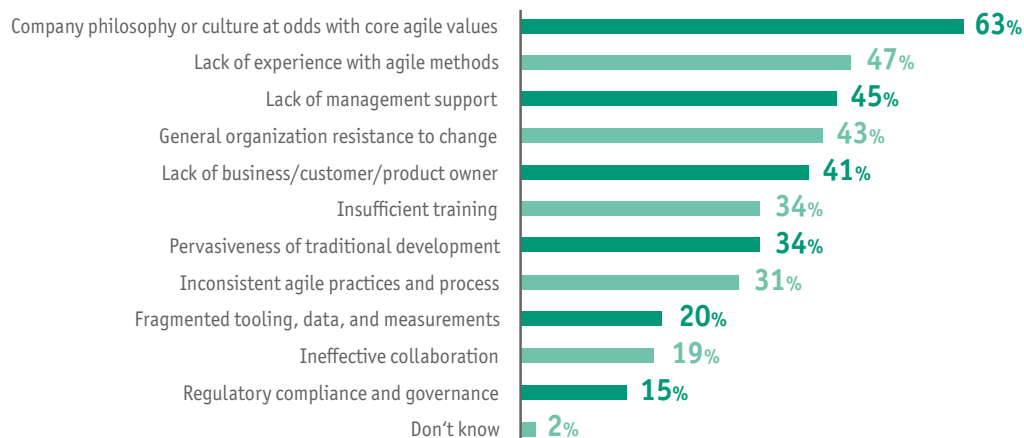


# STIMULATING A NEW CORPORATE CULTURE AND MOTIVATING STAFF

Most companies understand that the critical factors for agility are a change in the corporate culture and a new mindset among their employees. The agile approach can be difficult to embrace in a culture that depends heavily on legacy systems, or in a culture driven by control. For agile initiatives to thrive, a strategic cultural change program is required. According to a study by Version One – a developer of agile software – the greatest hurdle is the “company philosophy or culture at odds with core agile values” (see below).

This survey and other research stress the vital role of corporate culture. As mentioned above, although many agile projects start as bottom-up initiatives, they are soon crushed by the organization if they are not protected and supported. At the beginning of the agile journey, pilot or ‘lighthouse’ projects and agile initiatives need special support from a corporate change program backed by top management (CGI, 2016).

## Challenges Experienced Adopting & Scaling Agile



The survey by VersionOne (2017) among individuals from the global software development community in a broad range of industries reveal the greatest hurdles faced when implementing agility within an organization. Respondents were able to make multiple selections.

## Elements of an agile corporate culture

While every organization has to find its own unique way of reshaping its corporate culture and defining corporate values, several aspects are commonly found in agile corporations:

- ▶ **Empowerment of people:** Employees and teams enjoy greater autonomy and freedom to structure their work. Agile work environments benefit from less formal structures that prescribe how work needs to be accomplished.
- ▶ **Collaboration in teams:** Teams are put together based on competencies rather than status. This ensures that the best

people come together to focus on the successful outcome of a given task, regardless of their function or hierarchies.

- ▶ **Shared responsibility:** Decisions are made collaboratively in teams and not by a single executive. This reduces the risk of mistakes and leads to better identification and satisfaction with the result that has been reached.
- ▶ **Fluid tasks:** Agile environments are more fluid when it comes to assigning responsibilities. Rather than having a strict division of labor, tasks can overlap and even produce redundancies. This makes working more varied and it enables multiple team members to handle a given task.



- **Transparency:** Transparent goals and decision processes are critical success factors for agility. They ensure that projects support the corporate strategy and create value for the organization. Transparent processes within the project team help others to understand the steps taken and the decisions.
- **Endorsement from top management:** The support of the top management can go a long way in helping a new corporate culture come to life.

## New competencies needed by leaders and staff

Working in agile organizations also places high demands on the competencies, skills and attitudes of the staff and their superiors. They need:

- ✓ Openness
- ✓ The ability to work within teams
- ✓ Self-organization
- ✓ The ability to set up and lead project teams
- ✓ Insights into the abilities and expectations of other departments
- ✓ The ability to act as consultants
- ✓ The ability to work with agile methods
- ✓ Flexibility
- ✓ The ability to make decisions

Even though an increasing number of employees and middle management claim more flexibility, freedom, self-organization, and empowerment, not every team member is positive about engaging in agile ways of working. Some seek stability and do not welcome uncertainty and more freedom. Usually, more outgoing, proactive, career-minded people flourish in agile organizations while more introverted, less innovative or older, less flexible people find it harder to adapt (Bergmann, 2014; Peterson & Mannix, 2003; Schloegel et al., 2018).

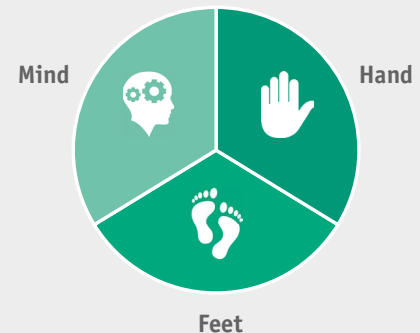
A number of empirical studies suggest that agility better matches the demands of generations Y and Z. Since they have grown up in a world where everything is accelerated, where communication is instantaneous and news and information travel fast, they tend to be more flexible and open to agile ways of working (Alton, 2017).

*» If there is no structure left, then people cannot get the appreciation and development possibilities they need. So they leave. We do not want that to happen in our company. «*

*Michael Brendel, Head of Supervisory Board Communication, Volkswagen AG*

## THYSSENKRUPP: AGILE MIND, HAND AND FEET

Alexander Wilke, Global Head of Communications at thyssenkrupp AG, uses a powerful image of agile competencies. Each communicator needs an 'agile mind', an 'agile hand', and 'agile feet'. This refers to the mindset of communication managers in large companies, the ability to work in interdisciplinary, cross-functional project teams and the speed of task management.



### Agile mind:

*» The abilities required to shape transformation processes are completely different from those needed for writing press releases. As communicators we need to be open to new tasks, have the capability to manage and engage at interfaces and be compatible with other functions – all this needs an agile mind, a mind that has to engage in lifelong learning. «*

### Agile hand:

*» I cannot rely on the task I was hired to do. I have to describe my own task and build a team able to address this task. Such a team will probably be a mixture of people from my own department and people from other areas of the firm. Maybe I have to lead the team, maybe I will have to find somebody else to lead it, either way – I have to reach my objective and targets. Communication people have to be networkers, literally knitting a net – a team – with their hands. «*

### Agile feet:

*» The external challenges put on the organization demand flexibility or agility. That means that you have to be in good shape to be able to respond. «*



*» When employees say they want freedom and responsibility it is a nice choice of words, but you have to cope with that. There is sometimes a dissent between what employees really want, because responsibility has consequences: you are being held accountable. I am a big fan of the situational leadership approach. Some people flourish with freedom and responsibility and some break – you have to know who is who. «*

*Jürgen Harrer, Head of Corporate Communications, FRAPORT AG*

## The challenge of motivating people

According to our interviews, a key challenge is making people want to work in agile organizations. The importance of intrinsic motivation and meaningfulness has increased. People in agile environments work more, seldom less. As long as agility is treated as an 'add-on' to standard procedures and tasks, employees who want (or have to) engage in agile projects have to add extra hours to their schedule. This has to be acknowledged – either monetarily or through other forms of incentives. Agile organizations should leave people more space for individual growth, learning, 'out-of-the-box-thinking', and non-hierarchical behavior. However, it would be naïve to think that all employees are motivated accordingly. Many like working in linear, vertical structures – not only older people. In fact, it is sometimes the younger, more ambitious staff who find agile structures problematic. While more senior staff might appreciate a new challenge, young people hoping for a well-planned corporate career might be disappointed upon seeing that many hierarchical levels – and thus rungs on their career ladder – have been demolished.

## Changing demands for leadership

Agility also demands a new understanding of leadership. It will be less anchored in hierarchies, departmental power structures, or personal influence. Instead, project or team leadership is

on the rise. This is characterized by the willingness to coach, enable and empower employees to make their own decisions. Technical responsibility is transferred to where decisions can be made best: in cross-functional teams. There, decisions are made in a decentralized and self-responsible manner (Rutz, 2017).

Up to now, a corporate career has been typically linked to a prescribed culture of behavior, punctuality, diligence and accountability. But our research shows that a culture of values is developing in many instances. Leadership becomes more difficult – it is about trust, individual compassion, and appreciation. The challenge is to lead without exerting burdening control (De Smet, 2018). Agile leaders have to be flexible and capable of transforming people, teams, and processes. They perceive leadership as a role – not as a position or function (Hofert, 2018). The ultimate goal of leaders in an agile organization is to make themselves redundant because the team is able to manage itself. Many executives feel uncomfortable about their new role. External coaches have reported their experiences of middle management actively or covertly pushing back against the agile transformation (CGI, 2016). Here, swift or firm confirmation from the top management can help the transformation to stay on course and further pursue agility.

» The most important thing when working with others is supporting the colleagues, because there are many people in large companies who do not like to collaborate and do not accept advice or decisions from someone with a lower hierarchical status. Here the superiors are asked to weigh in and support. «

Alexander Wilke, Global Head of Communications, thyssenkrupp AG

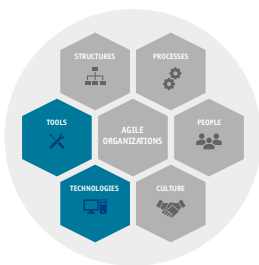
## New leadership roles

Three leadership roles are becoming increasingly important (e.g. Rutz, 2017; De Smet, 2018; Lawler & Worley, 2015):

- **The advisor** has a trust-based relationship with their employees. This role includes providing guidance and assisting in upcoming questions. The advisor should act as an example. Therefore, it is important to know and reflect on one's own values, needs and motives because they are the basis for acting authentically as a role model. Those who know their strengths and weaknesses and thus their own 'road map' are capable of meeting others with appreciation, openness and respect. They inspire people.
- **The multiplier:** In this role, the leader is responsible for transferring knowledge and experience. By providing platforms and channels to articulate, his/her task is to convey the big picture and ensure transparency. Multiplica-

tors break down the strategy into clear and easily remembered messages.

- **The coach:** The most important role for leaders in agile organizations is to support employees' individual responsibility. Leaders should actively involve employees in decision-making processes. A shift from being a controller to being a supporter and enabler of employees is essential. To do so, coaching and feedback skills are needed. Leaders must build up the people needed and equip them with suitable skills and management tools (Zerfass et al., 2018). Their task is to evaluate, coach, and develop people – but without traditional direct oversight. This includes matching talent to the right roles and value-creation opportunities. Organizations can adopt a set of talent management practices that encourage employees to learn and develop (Kiesenbauer, 2018).



## APPLYING AGILE TOOLS AND TECHNOLOGIES

Agile tools and practices such as Scrum, Kanban, Design Thinking, Sprints, etc. usually are the first things that come to mind when thinking about agility. However, from a strategic perspective such methods are for now the least important issue for communication executives. Nevertheless, a sound knowledge in this area is needed.

The use of agile tools is most efficient under certain conditions such as initially unknown solutions, modularized work or close collaboration with target groups. Such conditions exist for many product development functions, marketing projects or strategic-planning activities. Many companies rely on a mix of experienced and specifically trained staff and external coaches to

apply these techniques. Communication leaders should document appropriate approaches in toolboxes (Zerfass et al., 2018) and build in-house competencies.

As many are still not familiar with the terms and concepts, a brief overview of the three most commonly applied tools will be given here. Many tools are pretty easy to test out in smaller teams or projects. Still, it remains important to maintain a trial and error attitude, and not to follow the methodology to the letter; each team can adapt it to its needs. Often, teams also mix these techniques with non-agile techniques. (Komus & Kuberg, 2017; West & Grant, 2010)

## Kanban

Originally developed at Toyota in the 1950s to steer production, Kanban is used today by project managers in different fields to make projects faster and more efficient. It seeks to reduce lead times, the amount of work in process and to secure a continuous workflow. Work items are visualized on a 'Kanban Board' to give the team an overview of the progress and process. Work is pulled as capacity permits, rather than work being pushed into the process when requested.

The most popular way of doing this is by manually advancing sticky notes in different colors from 'To-Do' to 'Doing' to 'Done' columns on large whiteboards. Today there are also web-based solutions for Kanban Boards, but traditional whiteboards are often preferred in order to visualize the ongoing workflow for everyone. The sticky notes symbolize a task that is broken down into a manageable

amount of work, mostly between two or three hours. A daily 15-minute stand-up meeting informs every team member about the current status of all tasks and offers an opportunity to talk about it. The level of detail is down to the users, but in general the Kanban Board should not contain too many parallel tasks. This way, it is ensured that tasks flow smoothly and without delay over the board. Kanban's flexibility allows it to be overlaid onto existing workflows, systems and processes without disrupting what is already successfully in place.

Kanban can be easily implemented in any type of organization. The method is designed to meet minimal resistance and thus encourages small, continuous, and incremental changes to the current process.

(Anderson, 2010; Kanbanize, 2018; Sugimori et al., 1977)

## WORKING WITH KANBAN AT COMDIRECT

Given the fact that agility is closely tied to start-up mentality, digitalization, and speed of innovation, becoming more agile was a natural progression for comdirect. The online bank started its business 24 years ago but still retains its disruptive start-up mentality today. Disruption and change are ingrained in its business strategy and looking for structures and concepts that decrease the 'product-to-market' time is essential to its success.

With this in mind, comdirect started a change program with four pilot units in 2014 in order to become more agile. The change program focuses especially on executives and teams with the aim of developing a different concept of leadership based on coaching and enabling staff. The process was supported by an external coach who introduced the pilot units to agile tools such as Kanban.



One of the pilots was corporate communications – a team with ten employees. The initial impetus was to become faster and more efficient in dealing with the tasks at hand. The goal was for every colleague within CC to be able to handle every job. The team decided to work in a more topic-related fashion instead of focusing on different channels. Tasks are allocated following the pull instead of push principle: Self-determined product owners declare themselves responsible for upcoming topics and build their teams. The aim is to initiate more self-organization, transparency, and trust.

The team uses a mixture of different Kanban Boards to organize and prioritize its work: an overall board for the whole team, project boards that are linked to the departmental boards, and in some cases personal Kanban boards managed by the team members themselves. The overall Kanban Board is the heart of the team office and daily stand-up meetings keep everybody informed. The change process was supported by moving into an open-plan office.



»Stop starting –  
start finishing!«

**Annette Siragusano** is Head of Corporate Communications at comdirect bank AG, one of the leading direct banks in Germany (net income of € 71.544 million in 2017 | 1,450 employees). Since three years, Siragusano and her team have been working with Kanban. Comdirect has invested heavily in digital technologies, publishing the first online banking app and launching a “start-up garage” for financial technology start-ups.

**comdirect**

#### What was your motivation to start the agile journey with your team at comdirect?

*As a direct bank we are especially hit by the digital transformation. The speed of innovation in the field of direct/online banking is extreme. The same holds true for the communication department. The speed of communication and the number of channels are increasing every year. It was obvious that we had to collaborate more efficiently and effectively. We are a small team. Therefore, flexibility in terms of tasks and topics is very important for us. So, I would say it was initially both a top-down initiated process and a bottom-up process.*

#### What were your biggest challenges along the way?

*The process towards more agility has its ups and downs. While in the beginning people are motivated and exited, this usually declines when they understand that agility has its downsides, too.*

*Working with Kanban and Scrum techniques means that employees have to have more self-initiative and have to work more transparently and collaboratively. Not everyone is cut out for that. Some people need more convincing than others. Here, executives need patience but should stay determined about their course. Most problems work themselves out when establishing a culture of feedback, failure tolerance, and trust.*

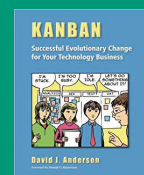
#### What tips can you give your colleagues that have just started this journey?

*First of all, just do it! It is easier when you start small. Although ‘islands of agility’ have their drawbacks, too, for us it worked. Communication has the general advantage that it is often relatively independent from other functions and units. Important is that your people understand your goal and share your sense of urgency. You have to explain why this approach is superior to others.*



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## Scrum

Scrum is a tool originally used in software development as a creative way to get products or results both effectively and efficiently. It emphasizes creative and adaptive teamwork to solve complex problems and reveals where a team performs well and where more coordination is needed. The method is designed for teams of three to nine members. Work packages are created that can be completed within timeboxed iterations, called sprints (30 days or less, most commonly two weeks). The daily progress is tracked and re-planned in daily 15-minute stand-up meetings, called scrums.

There are always two pre-defined roles in the team:

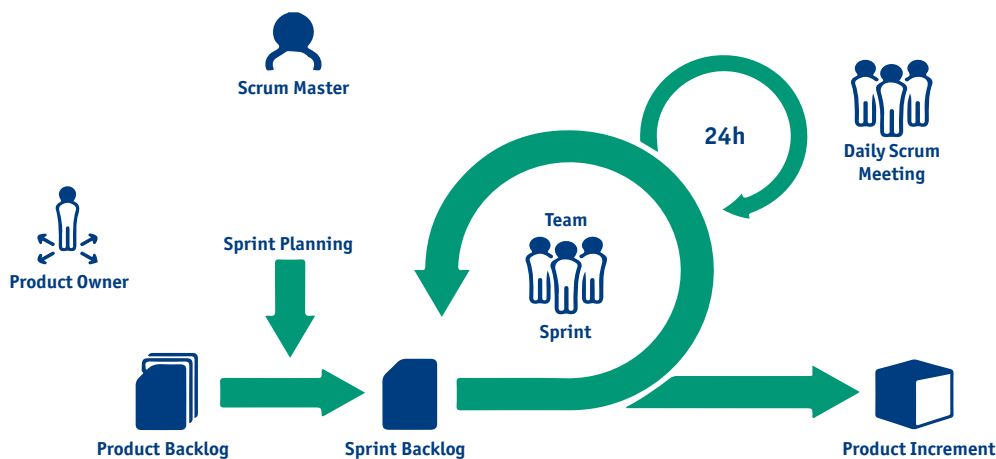
- 1 The **Product Owner** prepares a prioritized list of tasks – the product or sprint backlog – and is responsible for the success of the project. A team takes over the tasks from the backlog during the sprint planning and completes them in a pre-defined period (sprint). In the end, the results are presented to the customer in a sprint review. Within a sprint, a team creates real results rather than rough sketches. In

the process the team is completely free and decides on its own how to proceed.

- 2 The **Scrum Master** makes sure that the team can work without interruption. He/she ensures that everyone understands and follows the process.

(Maximini, 2015; Schwaber & Sutherland, 2017; Takeuchi & Nonaka, 1986; Van Ruler, 2014)

## Scrum process



A typical Scrum process (Source: Gollmer, 2018)



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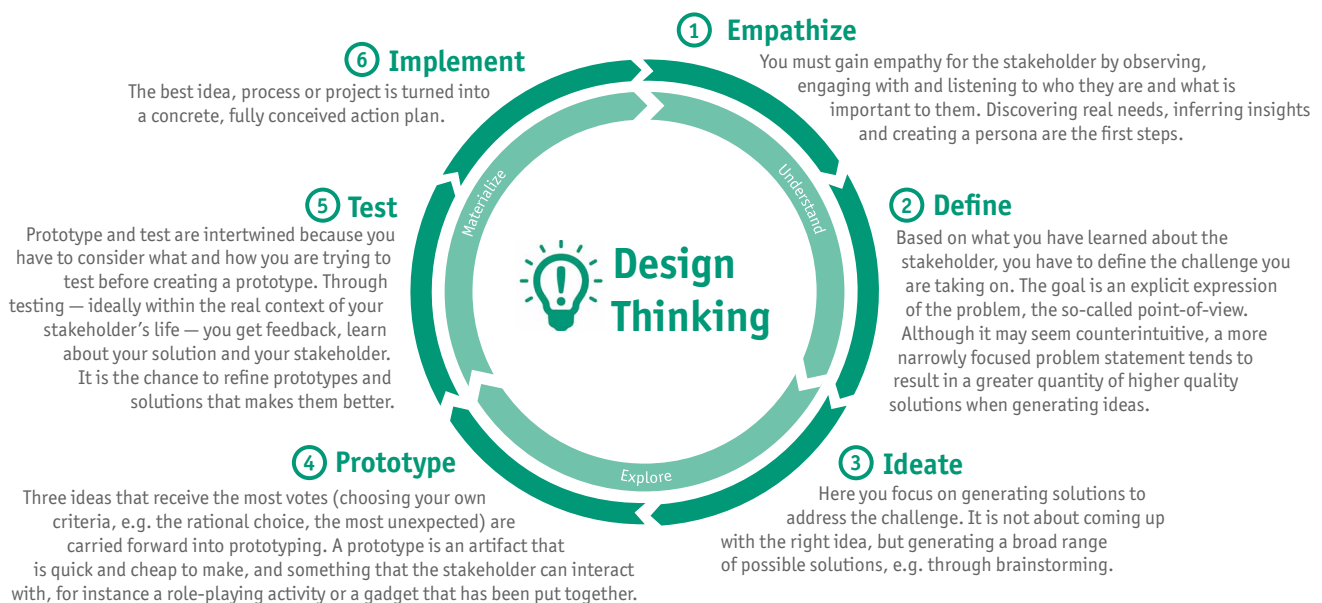
## Design Thinking

Design Thinking is an agile tool developed in the 1990s in Silicon Valley. What was originally intended as a method to create innovative products and services, has advanced to a comprehensive methodology of creative teamwork that brings unexpected solutions, changes in work culture, and improvements in team performance. Design Thinking focuses on both stakeholder and human needs, empathy, and values different points of view. It is about not looking for the perfect solution to a problem, but trying to quickly produce various innovative solutions by creating prototypes and then concentrating on the idea with the greatest potential. It is a method that fosters creative confidence and encourages thinking across boundaries. It is not only a process but also a mindset.

The success of Design Thinking is based on three key factors (HPI, 2018a; HPI, 2018b; Plattner et al., 2016):

- **People:** The team is formed in a multi-disciplinary way that fosters ideas that go beyond disciplinary borders. Diversity is one of the key principles to overcome the internal barriers of silo-thinking.
- **Place:** Creative workspaces invite the team to visualize their thoughts and share results. A free and flexible working environment enhances idea generation. Such a workspace should contain, for example, whiteboards, movable furniture, and material for prototyping like LEGO bricks. The room has to be adapted to the needs of each project.
- **Process:** The process is divided into five iterative loops (see graphic below) and visualized as a circle, but the steps can be performed in various orders. A culture open to errors and iterations are central to Design Thinking. Iterations occur during the whole process multiple times, but also on a smaller scale within each of the individual steps.

### Design Thinking process



Own figure based on Knüpfer, 2018



### FURTHER READINGS

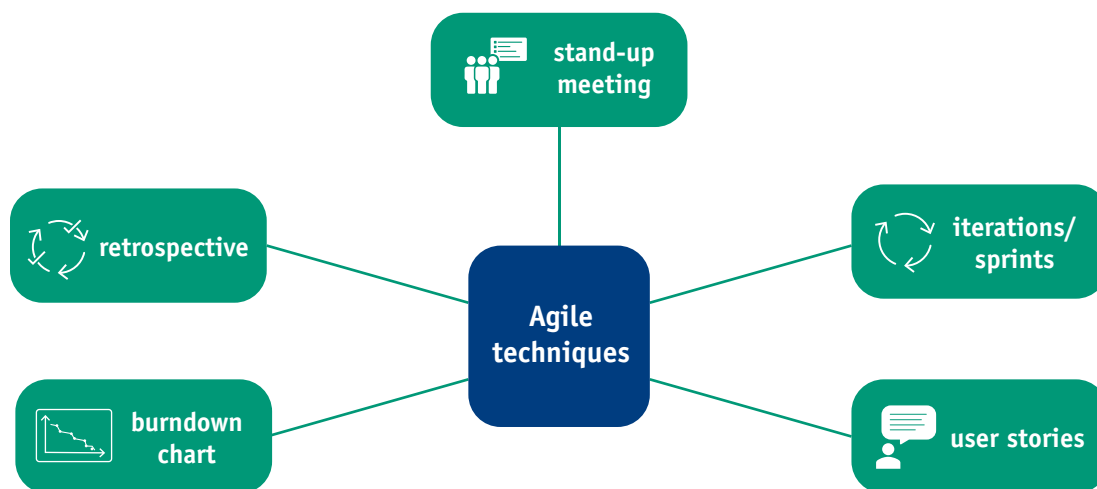
Plattner, H., Meinel, C., & Leifer, L. (Eds.) (2018). Design thinking research: Making distinctions: collaboration versus cooperation. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Website “openHPI” of the Hasso Plattner Institute ([www.open.hpi.de](http://www.open.hpi.de)) offering free online classes and tutorials on IT and Design Thinking topics.



## Common agile techniques

Even without fully implementing agile tools, communication departments can introduce aspects such as stand-up meetings or retrospectives to help improve project management. The most commonly used agile techniques are briefly introduced here:



- ▶ **Burndown charts** visualize and monitor the progress of work. It is a graphical representation of work left to do versus time. The horizontal axis of the burndown chart shows the time (for example in days) and the vertical axis shows the amount of work remaining (backlog). It helps to clearly see what is happening and how progress is being made. This is why it can be applied to any project containing measurable progress over time.
- ▶ The aim of **retrospectives** is to learn from the past and thus improve processes. All team members evaluate what went well and what did not. Retrospectives make an important contribution to the continuous improvement of the process including finding the most efficient way to deploy and improve agile practices.
- ▶ In a **stand-up meeting** all team members report what they have done the day before, where problems might have occurred and what they have planned for the current day. A stand-up meeting should not last more than 15 minutes. The purpose is to keep all team members aware of the project status and give an overall picture of the project.
- ▶ An **iteration or sprint** is a fixed period of time within which a team or person works towards the completion of a goal. At the beginning of each iteration the team holds a planning meeting to break down each of the goals scheduled for the sprint into specific tasks. After the sprint, work should stop and the results and team process are reviewed for better results in the next iteration. Usually, a project consists of a sequence of iterations and one iteration lasts from one day to four weeks.
- ▶ A **user story** is a brief statement that identifies the stakeholder and their needs or goals. The user story is written in everyday language and from the stakeholder's point of view. There is usually one user story per person (stakeholder). It outlines the role, the action or capability, and the benefit of the project to the user. In comparison to case studies, user stories are short-lived and only survive one iteration while case studies are more extensive and long-lasting.

(Dinwiddie, 2009; Hanschke, 2017; Van Ruler, 2015)

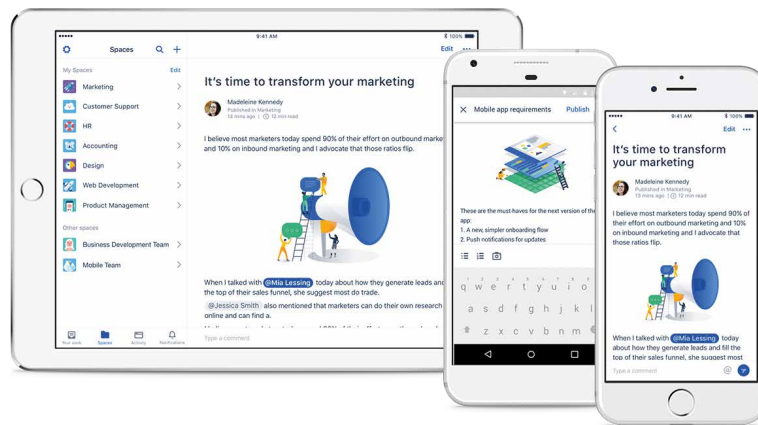


## Technologies supporting agility

Agile tools can be supported by technology. Software such as Jira, VersionOne, or Jam support agile practices and offer digital project management solutions. With the growing importance of cross-functional teamwork, collaboration software such as Skype for Business or Sharepoint is used more frequently, too. With the emphasis on transparency and knowledge sharing, many companies use their social intranet or wikis to share agile expertise and experiences. Some have groups that focus on exchanging experiences of working with agile tools. Others use

intranet facilities to provide information and material about agile practices.

An upcoming challenge mentioned by a couple of companies in our sample is the integration of digital project management and digital human resource management. Agile structures and processes need to be better covered and appreciated by human relations. For example, salaries and incentives need to be adopted flexibly to the current role and responsibility of the employee.



Confluence by Atlassian is a popular content collaboration software. (Picture: <https://de.atlassian.com/mobile>)

### AT A GLANCE

- Most communication executives are well aware of the challenges and opportunities that agility presents and rethink their own way of working.
- Communications can play a triple role in enhancing the agile transformation of an organization: First, by communicating about agility; second, by transforming its own departmental structures and processes; and third, by supporting and enabling other departments.
- For communication departments to become more agile, six factors need to be aligned: structures & processes, people & culture, and tools & technology.
- The most complex and challenging steps are to establish new structures, create flatter hierarchies and enhance collaboration in teams. Some communication departments have started to create 'islands of agility', while others pursue more fundamental transformations. However, the majority is still cautious about implementing radical changes and tearing down hierarchies.
- A new corporate culture and a new mind-set among staff are the two most critical success factors. Without the commitment and openness of leaders and employees, agility will never come to life. The new corporate culture should be based on empowerment, collaboration and shared responsibility. It also requires a new openness for failure. Executives need new leadership skills with the ability to coach, enable and empower employees and advise other business or corporate units.
- Many agile tools such as Scrum or Kanban, or elements of agile techniques, can be implemented fairly easily and usually operate on a trial-and-error basis. Technologies, such as digital project management software or knowledge management platforms, support the move towards working in a more agile manner.



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# CASE STUDY B. BRAUN: OUT OF THE BOX!

## B. BRAUN'S TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS MORE AGILITY AND SELF-ORGANIZATION

*'Tasks & Teams' is the motto of the change process towards a more agile and self-organized working environment at the global health-care provider B. Braun Melsungen AG. It all started in February 2017, when Corporate Human Resources and Corporate Communications became pilots and established new ways of working. Dr. Lisa Dühring visited B. Braun in August 2018. She talked to executives and employees in both departments about their experiences.*

The change process was initiated at the beginning of 2017 by Prof. Dr. Heinz-Walter Große, Chairman of the Board, and Dr. Bernadette Tillmanns-Estorf, Senior Vice President of Corporate Communications and Corporate Human Resources. The aim was to try out and establish new ways of cooperation in order to enable the company to react more quickly to changing market requirements. The process was supported by a start-up consultancy specialized in self-organization and agility in corporate transformation projects. Two teams – Corporate Communications (CC) and Corporate Human Resources (CHR) – became pilots on B. Braun's way towards becoming a more agile company. The program is called 'Tasks & Teams'. The overall aims are to reduce complexity, to evaluate existing structures and processes, to think in networks instead of silos, to act independently, and to overcome hierarchies that make decisions slow and ineffective. Many things are still in their testing phase and processes are continuously being adapted.

B. Braun wants to establish a self-organized, agile form of cooperation, characterized by autonomy, transparency, and trust: Cooperation is not determined through hierarchies, but through roles and responsibilities; work is organized in so-called 'circles' instead of organizational charts. The aim is to find the best team for a task, independent of functional silos.

### Hybrid approach – combining existing structures with agile approaches

B. Braun has decided on a hybrid approach that combines existing functional structures with new agile ways of cooperation. The concept has so far been implemented in two pilot departments only. Other departments have just started their journey. CHR underwent major structural changes: The structure of the overall department was slimmed down to only three main teams, namely HR Management & Development, Digital HR, and Compensation & Benefits, each with just one team lead. Thus, leadership positions were reduced and regular staff were offered more responsibility. The CC department did not undergo major restructuring, but here, too, tasks are increasingly organized in so-called circles.

These circles are able to combine both existing and new structures in one working environment. On the one hand, staff handle daily business and individual responsibilities in the existing functional structures. On the other hand, topics, projects and tasks are increasingly organized in circles. Here, members of different teams come together to unite the best people for the task. New circles are advertised department-wide with people free to apply if they have the competencies, skills and capacity needed. Usually, a circle comprises three to six members. It has a clear



purpose and corresponding responsibilities such as the organization of a special event or the conceptualization of the new intranet. Each member has a similarly defined role.

There are procedural roles such as representative, facilitator, or documentarist. The representative ensures that the circle is able to fulfill its purpose. He or she presents the circle and its achievements to other organizational members or even the executive board. The facilitator provides structure and orientation for the circle members and is responsible for effective meetings that follow the principles of cooperation. The documentarist records the results of the circle and provides transparency, either through wiki entries or other forms of result presentation. In addition, there are roles like 'expert', 'functional decision maker', or 'final decision maker' depending on the circle constitution. These roles

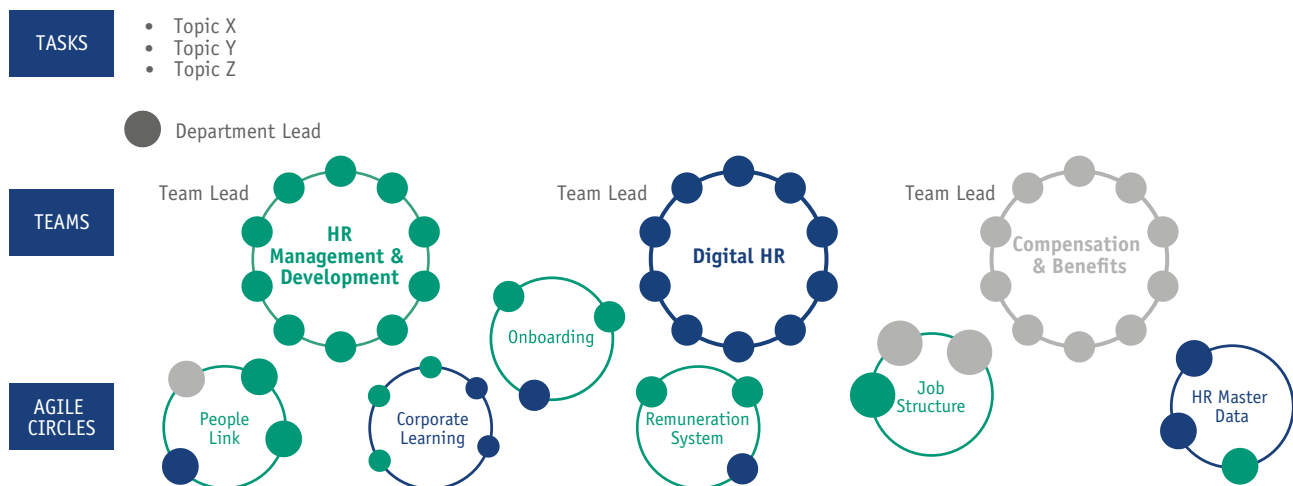
are not fixed but rather depend on the tasks at hand and aim to provide the necessary conditions for an effective and efficient work environment. Functional roles and hierarchies are of no importance here. Members of the circles mutually decide on principles and tools of cooperation, means of decision making, and meeting structure.

There are three main structures in the CC and CHR departments of B. Braun:

- ▶ **Functional teams:** Based on the traditional concept of disciplinary teams. Employees are assigned to a disciplinary executive responsible for goal cascading, prioritization of tasks, budgeting, and career development.
- ▶ **Circles:** Circles with short- or medium-term goals that are comprised of multidisciplinary experts who develop and elaborate a topic or execute a certain project while sharing their knowledge.
- ▶ **Meta circles:** Long-term circles with tasks on a higher level that address the fundamental challenges of Tasks & Teams. These circles (at the moment: Constitution, Coordination, Cooperation, People, Transfer, Change Architects) are committed to optimizing and adapting the concept of Tasks & Teams and to enabling other parts of the company to adopt the concept.

CC and CHR have different tasks and roles depending on the circles they are currently involved in.

## A more flexible org chart at B. Braun



Collaboration at B. Braun is no longer characterized by rigid hierarchies, but by roles and responsibilities that are organized in circles.

## Benefits

Many employees reported that the new structure has led to faster decision making, fewer hierarchies, more motivation, more interdisciplinary work and increased sharing of expertise. They confirmed that the last one and a half years really brought a cultural change. There is a new openness for trial and error, which is a big step for a company that produces highly sensitive health-care products with a zero-mistake aspiration. While this is by no means necessary in many parts of the company, communication and HR management are fields where creativity and trial phases are important. In accordance with B. Braun's motto 'Sharing Expertise', colleagues are continuously learning from each other and acquiring new skills and competencies. Fixed meeting rules help to achieve results faster and in a more effective manner. Current projects and results are more transparent to the whole team than they were previously. Cooperation has become more open and is based on trust and a positive feedback culture. Open Kanban or project boards are used to visualize ongoing work in projects and circles.

Open office and clean desk principles allow for flexible working structures and enable teams to meet independently. Communication and collaboration are in focus. It also opened up old-fashioned structures both hierarchically and in terms of content. Employees are free to explore new topics and tasks and also bear more responsibility. Motivation is higher as tasks are taken on voluntarily and the space to experiment, to be creative, and to be self-responsible has expanded.

## Challenges

However, there are obstacles and challenges, too. Engaging in a radical change program such as this is hard and time-consuming work for everyone involved. Disrupting existing structures and processes does not make a department more agile from the start. On the contrary, it slows down processes and reduces efficiency at the beginning where everyone has to find his or her new role and understand the new process. Our interview partners confirmed that they invested a lot of time in meetings and circles that worked out the 'rules of the game'. The goal of making projects, tasks, and results more transparent leads to extra work documenting and communicating. The return, however, is obvious: The whole team feels much more informed and involved in what their colleagues do.

Due to the current hybrid nature of the process, both executives and regular staff work in 'two worlds'. With CC and CHR acting as test pilots for now, other departments in the company are still structured differently. These two mentalities sometimes clash. In particular, executives do not always find it easy to define their

new role – both towards their direct reports as well as towards other executives within the company. In their department a new leadership culture based on enabling and coaching colleagues is advocated, while in other departments more conventional aspects like title, budget, and headcount still apply. Furthermore, staff members sometimes struggle to accommodate both their daily business as well as the work within the circles. The agile concepts of self-organization and self-motivation put high demands on staff – demands that not every person is comfortable with. Thus, some staff members thrive in these new structures while others find it hard to adapt to their new role. Getting every team member on board is certainly a delicate topic and represents a significant leadership challenge.

Other sensitive topics are career development and incentives. As leadership positions have been reduced, at least in the CHR department, and executive roles in general now face scrutiny, formal career development becomes less clear. At the moment, both executives and staff are trying to delineate together what careers and incentives look like in the future. First solutions such as development talks have been introduced.

## Takeaways and outlook

B. Braun's communication and HR departments have started a bold change program that has the potential to act as an example for other parts of the company. It is a process with an open end, which makes it both exciting and challenging at the same time. The key takeaway is that it is important to stick to the fundamental principles of self-organization and agile working like prototyping, iteration, error tolerance, etc. right from the start and throughout the whole process. It is a process that is above all continuously shaped and altered by the people living and working in it, and thus gives the staff the freedom to alter and adapt it according to their needs.

Meanwhile, the project has gained a lot of attention within the rest of the company. Some areas would like to adopt the principles of agile working within their own departments. Thus, CC and CHR have established two special circles – Transfer and Change Architects – that work on concepts, strategies, and materials in order to facilitate the change process in other parts of B. Braun. Some staff members also engage in extra training in order to act as 'meeting pilots' and 'process guides', meaning that they are special contact points within the team who accompany and guide Tasks & Teams during its next steps.

The board has declared its full commitment and formal support to transfer the pilot into standard structures and procedures whenever suitable.





» Trust your team  
and simply do it«

**Dr. Bernadette Tillmanns-Estorf** is Senior Vice President Corporate Communications and Corporate Human Resources at B. Braun – a family-owned company founded in 1839. Today the B. Braun Group is one of the world's leading providers and manufacturers of health-care solutions. The company has subsidiaries in 64 countries, employs more than 63,000 people and generated a revenue of 6.8 billion Euros in 2017.

**B | BRAUN**  
SHARING EXPERTISE

#### **What was the motivation to start the agility program 'Tasks & Teams' at B. Braun?**

*One of the first reasons was to get rid of these 'old fashioned' organizational charts that have the tendency to get bigger and bigger. We wanted to redefine working within our teams without hiring more and more people. Besides, I am convinced that we have to react to challenges put on us by the VUCA world – especially in the domains of communications and HR management. One of my main focuses is leadership. What does contemporary leadership look like? What do we have to do to enable employees to be accountable and to make their own decisions? Another aspect refers to employee development. In relatively small departments like ours with about 35 FTE in the Corporate Communications Department, career paths are more difficult to realize. With our new agility program 'Tasks & Teams' employees have the opportunity to try out new tasks and topics and develop new skills and competencies.*

#### **What was your biggest challenge in implementing 'Tasks & Teams'?**

*One of the biggest challenges was starting this project without knowing what exactly was going to come out of it. We were very deliberate in our decision not to implement a blueprint approach*

*but to develop 'Tasks & Teams' as a tailor-made B. Braun concept for new ways of working. There were times when we had more questions than we had answers and it felt as though we weren't making much progress. In retrospect these moments were really important to go forward because it was us finding the way out and giving the right answers. For sure, this process helped us to strengthen our teams and to learn more about each other.*

#### **What were your takeaways from the process and what is your advice to other colleagues that are at the beginning of a similar process?**

*It is difficult to give general advice as every context is different and it is so valuable to gain your own experience. What I can say is that it is really valuable to have top level support. Agile transformation is a big change and it was a great advantage to have the backing of our chairman of the board. Secondly, I can recommend involving the employees in the development of the process from an early stage. This ensures that you develop and test an approach that actually suits everyone's needs. It also allows us to learn as the process progresses and to develop a new mindset. This was exactly what was important to us: We have excellently trained, competent and motivated employees who can think and act independently and should do so. This benefits the individual as well as the company. So, to sum it up, I would say: Trust your team and don't talk, but do it.*

# CONCLUSIONS & OUTLOOK

The challenge of coping with agility has a **double meaning for communication leaders**. It refers on the one hand to the challenges faced by corporations and communications when demanding a change towards more agile ways of organizing, managing, production, and work. On the other hand, it refers to agility as a means to address and master these issues. Agility is both a challenge and a chance for communication managers. It beats hierarchies and intricacies, but at the same time creates complexities and new problems of its own. In agile organizations everything is connected. You cannot turn one screw without affecting a number of others.

A big **advantage of agility** is the interconnectedness it enhances

– which is a pitfall, too. Structures, processes, culture, people, and practices have to be combined in a coherent manner, across the communication department and across the whole organization. Our research emphasized that agility is not just a passing fashion. It is likely to stay because of its superior speed and flexibility compared to alternative ways of approaching the dynamics of modern organizations.

However, agility is definitely a phenomenon that should be **considered carefully**. The majority of companies are probably right to be cautious in implementing agile structures, processes,

and practices. On the other hand, the problem with creating ‘islands of agility’ as a test run is just that: they are islands. Software developers who have implemented agile routines often complain that business units are unable to react to the increased speed they require, and that they fail to turn fast development cycles into business value and sustainable competitive advantage (Arell, n.d.). Similarly, creating islands of agility within communication departments might result

in friction with other units and to a suboptimal utilization of communicative assets.

Agility demands a **fundamental change of people’s mindsets**.

It is no longer ‘us in here and them out there’. There is no room for traditional turf wars between

communication and marketing departments or professionals working in corporate headquarters and colleagues communicating in business units or country branches. In fact, collaboration and interconnectedness means more than colored post-it notes on a wall or a fancy new office space. It is hard work. And it means letting go and taking a leap of faith. Communications cannot do this alone. It can provide infrastructure and guidelines, maybe even act as an example for others. But its major contribution to corporate value lies in enabling other parts of the organization to become more agile.

*»Becoming agile is a process – iterative and erratic – and you have to accept that. «*

*Martina Rauch, Member of the Executive Board and Head of Corporate Communications, Veolia Germany*



## Further research topics

This Communication Insights has summarized the key findings of the first phase of our research project exploring corporate communications in agile organizations. It provides a general introduction to the trend, the challenges of agility, and the role of corporate communications. However, this is only a glimpse into this multifaceted topic. Some topics will be addressed in more depth in the next steps of the research program:

- ▶ **Agile content management:** Content management stands out as one of the central tasks of communication departments. It is a topic that requires a strong collaboration within the department and with other business units. Often the work is carried out by mixed teams with flat hierarchies that sit together in newsrooms. A specific research project carried out by the University of Vienna will provide insights into this pressing issue.
- ▶ **Employee engagement:** Employees are the essence of agility. They have to make agility come alive. For now, our research focused on communication leaders and their experiences. The next step will be to gain more insight into employees' perceptions of and experiences with agility. Important aspects in this context are not only the new skills and competencies needed to cope with agility, but also what incentives and career opportunities could look like in the future.
- ▶ **Leadership:** Another topic that requires more elaboration is the challenge of leadership in agile organizations. How will leadership change when it is no longer rooted in hierarchical structures, formal status, and supported by long-term experience? In addition, how does agile leadership work in other cultures with a completely different set of cultural and business norms and values?
- ▶ **Cooperation with HR management:** Many of these questions are deeply entwined with those currently addressed by other disciplines – such as human resources (HR) management. Most interviewees stressed the strong link between communication and HR in all challenges associated with agility – implementing corporate/cultural change programs, leadership training, as well as core aspects of HR management (flexible working hours, flexible payment schemes, new incentives, high-potential development, etc.). The overlap of issues opens up various avenues for interdisciplinary research programs and collaborations in practice.
- ▶ **Cooperation with agencies and service providers:** Most communication departments have established close relationships with coaches and consultancies to support them on their way towards agility. Additionally, the traditional cooperation between communication departments and communication agencies is also affected when organizations become more agile. A complementary research project at the University of Münster addresses these questions and asks: How will this collaboration change when agile processes are in place? How far have service providers come with establishing agile ways of working on their own?
- ▶ **Measurement:** Another field that might be addressed in future research is communication measurement and controlling in agile organizations. Becoming more agile has implications for all elements of the management process, including evaluation and performance management. The interconnected, entwined nature of agile projects and processes as well as the required flexibility, responsiveness, and speed of working tend to make traditional approaches to measurement and key performance indicators (KPIs) more difficult.
- ▶ **Tools:** Agile work is characterized by flexibility and speed. This seems to conflict with the trend of establishing management tools that guide the analysis, planning, implementation, and evaluation of communication activities and their respective steering processes. Such tools secure efficiency and effectiveness, and help to strengthen the trust of top management and (internal) clients in the problem-solving competency of communication professionals. Agile communication departments need to revise their toolboxes: procedures for agile collaboration will be added and trained, while rigid routines for operational activities might be scrapped. Thinking tools for strategic decisions and key routines, on the other hand, will be more important than before as practitioners have to cope with a higher variety of tasks.

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# ACADEMIC SOCIETY FOR MANAGEMENT & COMMUNICATION

The Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication is a joint initiative of leading companies and universities. Through research and knowledge sharing it aims to actively shape the future of corporate communications. The initiative was founded in 2010, and today is supported by six universities and nearly 40 corporate partners.

The Academic Society initiates research projects that are both practical and future-oriented. They go beyond disciplinary boundaries and are designed as comprehensive studies that support the ongoing professionalization of corporate communications.

The Academic Society is part of the Günter Thiele Foundation for Communication & Management, a non-profit entity governed by state law, dedicated to the advancement of science and knowledge transfer in the field.

## Value Creating Communication

Shaping the future of corporate communications, developing a consistent profile for the profession and gaining a better understanding of the most important challenges – these are the central goals of the *Value Creating Communication* research program that the Academic Society for Management & Communication has been working on since 2015.

Researchers at various German and European universities are collaborating with corporate communications executives from global companies to answer central questions for each communication department. Together they are researching key challenges such as digitalization and big data, value creation or the role of communication departments in agile organizations. In terms of scope and content, the number of experts involved and the budget, it is the most comprehensive research program to date in the field of corporate communications.

So far, Value Creating Communication has researched four topics:

**Module I:** How will corporate communications change due to new social conditions and megatrends – above all digitalization and big data? (2015–2017, headed by Prof. Dr. Ulrike Röttger)

► Communication Insights, Issue 2: Wohin geht die Reise?

► Communication Insights, Issue 4: Startklar für Big Data

**Module II:** How do corporate communications create value for an organization? How to align communication and business strategy? And which contribution can communication make to the overall business success? (2015–2017, headed by Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass)

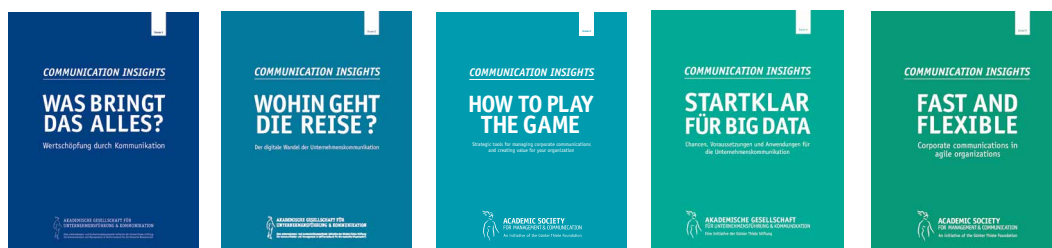
► Communication Insights, Issue 1: Was bringt das alles?

► Communication Insights, Issue 3: How to play the game

**Module III:** How will agility transform corporate communications? How will collaboration with internal and external partners change? And how can agile content management look like? (2017–2019, headed by Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass, Prof. Dr. Ulrike Röttger, Prof. Dr. Sabine Einwiller)

► Communication Insights, Issue 5: Fast and flexible

**Module IV:** Which influence do social bots have on the social media communication of organizations? How should corporate communications deal with these challenges? (2018–2019, headed by Prof. Dr. Stefan Stieglitz)



## Corporate communications in agile organizations

Communication leaders are currently faced with the challenge of mastering the needs of agile organizations in volatile environments. Scientific research in this field is scarce. The research program closes the gap by investigating how corporate communications should align its own structures and processes, people management and collaboration with internal and external partners.

Given the complexity of the topic, the program is divided into three subprojects focusing on different aspects:

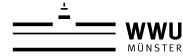
- 1 **Implications of agility for managing the communication department:** How to align agile structures and processes, people and cultures as well as tools and technologies, and how to support other units and overall goals in agile organizations? (Leipzig University: Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfass, Dr. Lisa Dühring)

- 2 **Implications of agility for the relationship with external consultancies and service providers:** How will collaboration change in agile settings and how can consultancies support the transformation process? (University of Münster: Prof. Dr. Ulrike Röttger, Dr. Christian Wiencierz)

- 3 **Implications of agility on content management:** What does the central task of producing and communicating content look like in agile settings? (University of Vienna: Prof. Dr. Sabine Einwiller, Dr. Jens Seiffert-Brockmann)

The Universities of Leipzig, Münster and Vienna closely collaborate to shed light on agility in corporate communications from different angles. They are supported by renowned communication leaders from global corporations across all industries to gain first-hand insight.

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