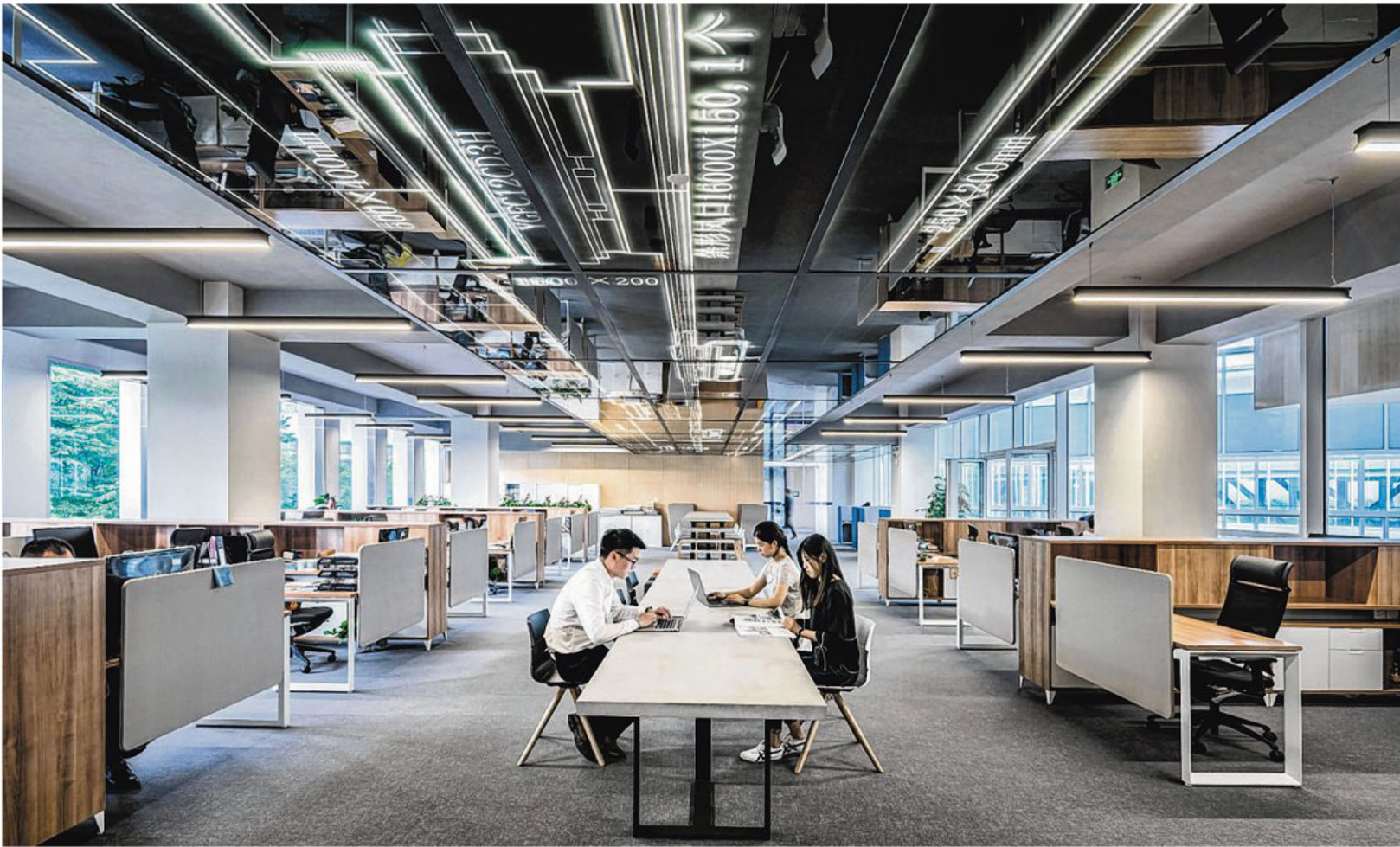


Why employees of the future need a new superpower – agility



A 2023 World Economic Forum report anticipates that, globally, close to 44 per cent of workers' skills will be disrupted in the next five years. But just equipping staff with new skills may not be enough, says the writer. Organisations would need to rely on staff who are agile in handling emergencies and can adapt swiftly to fluctuating situations, she adds. PHOTO: UNSPLASH

To succeed amid disruption, it's not enough to learn new skills. Employees will also need to be adaptable and agile.

Laurel Teo

Imagine that you're a hiring manager trying to choose between two shortlisted applicants.

One has a curriculum vitae that matches 95 per cent of the prerequisites for the role, such as specific job skills, relevant work experience and qualifications. The other CV is a 60 per cent match.

Which would you choose?

Aha! This is a trick question, you might say. You would schedule an interview with each candidate before making up your mind.

You might even arrange for a whole battery of assessments, such as personality tests, writing assignments, coding tasks (for information technology-related jobs), or situational judgment tests that gauge how candidates respond to hypothetical work problems.

For some of you, this might be a non-issue. Any CV that's below a 90 per cent match would never make it past your company's screening algorithms to land on the hiring manager's desk.

Whichever the case may be, one important hiring criterion that many organisations often

overlook is employee agility.

This agility is often associated with related concepts, such as adaptability, flexibility, resilience and responsiveness. In a world of disruption, one key characteristic that companies will come to value is agility in their employees – workers who are open to change and can adapt to it.

Why is agility important? Can it be reliably identified and measured? Is it a fixed characteristic, or can people improve their work and career agility through training or other means?

EMPLOYEE AGILITY A 'HIDDEN TALENT'

While few recruiters would dispute that agility is a "good to have", not many would consider it a deal-breaker when it comes to the crunch. Most would prioritise task-specific skills, relevant job experience, et cetera, in the hiring process. Some may also consider personality and fit with the organisational culture. Yet agility is precisely the "hidden talent" that could prove to be far more critical than many of the standard metrics by which employers rate job applicants and employees today.

First, some background context. Anyone who's been paying any attention to news reports and workplace developments would know that the global economy is hurtling into an era of unprecedented disruptions, fuelled by the rapid rise of artificial intelligence and other novel technologies, the growing

urgency of climate challenges and escalating geopolitical tensions. The implications on jobs and labour markets are enormous.

A 2023 World Economic Forum report anticipates that, globally, close to 44 per cent of workers' skills will be disrupted in the next five years. The report further predicts that 83 million existing jobs will be eliminated and 69 million new jobs created, while six in 10 workers will need to be trained before 2027.

This is why the Singapore Government has been repeatedly nudging workers to upskill or reskill.

In a recent pre-Budget roundtable for local industry leaders, one of the items on their wish list for Budget 2024 is for greater government support to equip "all segments of the workforce with new skills in the face of technological disruption".

But merely equipping employees with new skills may not be enough. What makes the future of work especially challenging is that restructuring will be rapid and frequent. To compete effectively in such a situation of high volatility and complexity, organisations would need to rely on employees who are agile in handling emergencies and can adapt swiftly to fluctuating situations. Agile employees are also most likely to survive and succeed in such a dynamic environment, compared with less agile peers.

Since the 1980s, management scholars have been studying agility at various levels – organisational, team and

individual. The recent macro environment has put agility – in particular, at the individual or employee level – under the spotlight again. Most scholars agree that employee agility encompasses three dimensions: attitudes (mindsets), abilities (skills) and behaviours (actions).

To be agile, employees should have attitudes such as being open to change and having a growth mindset. Growth mindset refers to the belief that each person's intelligence and capacity for improvement are not fixed, but can grow and be refined through personal effort.

Abilities crucial for agility include learning agility and resilience. An employee demonstrates learning agility by quickly understanding a situation, identifying patterns, interpreting them, learning from such experiences and flexibly changing ideas and behaviours to adapt to different environments.

Resilience refers to one's ability to tolerate uncertain, unfamiliar and unpredictable situations, and to operate well under stress and perform in crises.

Finally, agile employees display innovative and adaptive behaviours. They can make changes to better fit a new environment, and can anticipate and address issues that may arise from the changes taking place around them.

Importantly, agility can be reliably identified and measured through self-report surveys and third-party observations (for example, ratings by managers, co-workers or assessors). More

research is also unfolding in this area, potentially using multiple short role-plays to test people's responses in different situations.

RETHINKING AND REDOING TRAINING

While some people may start off being more agile than others, levels of agility are not fixed or static. Agility can be strengthened through training, coaching and conscious practice.

This requires first a rethink of the way training is perceived and conducted. The traditional approach has focused on getting trainees to replicate skills they are trained in.

Moving forward, trainees may have to learn how to adapt their knowledge and skills and how to test assumptions and learn from errors.

In the future of work, not only do employees need to acquire new skills for evolving jobs, more importantly, they must form their own understanding of these skills and knowledge. This will help them to generalise what is learnt in a specific context to be nimbly applied and adapted across different situations they have not encountered previously.

To improve learning ability, for example, employees can be asked to imagine different situations they could encounter and consider how they might respond in these scenarios. In essence, they pre-plan how they might apply their knowledge to future experiences.

Or, they could be made to undergo an exercise in "what might have been" and imagine different outcomes to a past event if alternative actions had been taken. It helps people to tease out cause-and-effect relationships and extract lessons for future application.

They can also be made to learn and identify patterns in what may appear to be unrelated or distinct experiences. It helps in "connecting the dots" between past experiences and future opportunities, such as how entrepreneurs often "spot" future business prospects from observing some signs or trends.

Perhaps one way to understand how agility relates to and supports new skills acquisition is to consider a sports analogy. To excel in a certain sport, say rock climbing, you would need to build strength, stamina and flexibility, apart from learning techniques specific to rock climbing. Similarly, to excel at lifelong learning, you'd first need to build agility across the three dimensions – that is, have the relevant mindset, skills and behaviours discussed earlier.

Consider again our initial example of the two job applicants. There is a high chance that in five years, the 95 per cent match candidate may not be such a close match – nor the best match. It all depends on the extent to which the job in question will change and the relative agility of the two candidates. If the 60 per cent match candidate turns out to be quicker at picking up new skills and sharper at tackling novel challenges, this candidate could easily outperform the other by 2029 (or earlier).

So back to the question: Which candidate would you hire now?

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