

Agile HR

Agile HR

*Improve performance in a changing
world of work*

Natal Dank and Riina Hellström



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First published in Great Britain and the United States in 2020 by Kogan Page Limited
Second edition 2020

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2nd Floor, 45 Gee Street
London
EC1V 3RS
United Kingdom
www.koganpage.com

122 W 27th St, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10001
USA

4737/23 Ansari Road
Daryaganj
New Delhi 110002
India

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ISBNs

Hardback 978 1 78966 586 4
Paperback 978 1 78966 585 7
Ebook 978 1 78966 587 1

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[to follow]

Typeset by Integra Software Services, Pondicherry
Print production managed by Jellyfish
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

*To Miksu, Axel and Oscar,
Tack för ert stöd, era kramar
och er kärlek. Jag älskar er.*

*To Natal,
For better or for worse...
we made it.
Thank you and you rock!*

Riina

*To Tim,
I'm nothing without you.*

*To Riina,
Together we're stronger.
Yeah, we did it!
Big hugs, partner.*

Natal

CONTENTS

List of figures and tables xiii
Preface: Agile HR and the authors xv
Agile HR and the 2020 pandemic xix
Acknowledgements xxi

PART ONE

Defining Agile HR 1

01 Introduction 3

What Agile HR is 3
Agile for HR and HR for Agile 8
References 10

PART TWO

The Agile mindset 11

02 Why Agile? 13

Introduction 13
The search for business agility 15
Our HR legacy 21
Conclusion 22
References 25

03 The Agile mindset 26

Introduction 26
The waterfall approach to projects 27
Agile mindset 32
Agile principles 37
Conclusion 43
References 44

04 Design thinking for Agile teams 45

Introduction 45

Design thinking 45

Conclusion 62

References 64

05 Agile ways of working 65

Introduction 65

Is Agile just a fad? 65

Agile ways of working 66

Conclusion 82

References 83

06 Scrum and Kanban 84

Introduction 84

Scrum 84

Kanban 91

Conclusion 93

References 94

PART THREE**Agile for HR Toolkit 97****07 Agile for HR: An introduction 99****08 Agile for HR Toolkit: Value and prioritization 101**

Introduction 101

Defining value 102

Building a strategic portfolio of work 106

Working with a backlog 118

Conclusion 119

References 120

09 Agile for HR Toolkit: Co-creation 121

Introduction 121

Design thinking in HR 122

Applying design thinking to onboarding 123
Conclusion 143
Reference 144

10 Agile for HR Toolkit: Agile teams and operational models in HR 145

Introduction 145
End of Ulrich model 146
Agile HR cadence 148
Prioritization and transparency 148
Agile HR release planning 149
New roles and skills 150
Delivering end-to-end people experience 152
Challenges faced when building Agile HR teams 153
Agile HR operational models 155
Conclusion 164
References 165

11 Agile for HR Toolkit: Thinking like a scientist 166

Introduction 166
Evidence-based practice 167
Tips to get started 168
Evidence-based storytelling 172
From activity to impact 174
Data-driven HR service design 175
Conclusion 177
References 178

12 Agile for HR Toolkit: Continuous improvement 179

Introduction 179
Removing impediments 179
Prioritizing improvements 180
Personal level 181
Team level 183
Organizational and product level 186
Conclusion 189
References 190

PART FOUR**HR for Agile 191****13 Introduction 193****14 Co-creating the Agile vision 195**

Introduction 195

Start with the ‘why’ 195

Creating a strong vision 202

Change resistance 205

Conclusion 207

References 208

15 Agile organizational design 209

Introduction 209

Designing Agile organizations 210

Pathway one: Agile-by-nature 211

Pathway two: Scaling Agile through transformation 222

Conclusion 235

References 236

16 HR’s role in Agile transformation 240

Introduction 240

Be a transformational leader 240

Ensure leaders understand Agile 241

Understand the mindset before the practices 242

Own the change 243

Get to know different scaling models 243

Agile transformation should be Agile 244

Lead transformation through a backlog 245

Measure the transformation and be transparent about tensions 245

Prepare for new roles 246

Enable capability development 247

Design for workforce agility 248

Ensure extra support for virtual teams 249

Ensure a pull-based work system 249

Make it safe to discuss and solve impediments 250

Support people and teams with performance trouble	251
Evolve the role of leader	251
Invest in physical space	253
Upskill HR in Agile	254
Partner with Agile coaches	255
Sync the transformation of our own Agile HR operating model	256
Conclusion	256
References	257

17 Agile HR products and services 258

Introduction	258
Performance management and Agile	261
Reward and Agile	268
Talent and Agile	274
Conclusion	278
References	279

PART FIVE

Conclusion	283
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18 Let's get going 285

How to start	285
An Agile HR future	289
References	290

<i>Appendix: From traditional HR to Agile HR</i>	292
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<i>Index</i>	294
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LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURES

- 2.1 From hierarchy to network 23
- 3.1 Gantt chart example 27
- 3.2 The waterfall approach 29
- 3.3 The Agile approach 33
- 3.4 The Agile Onion 37
- 4.1 Design thinking questions 47
- 4.2 Design thinking and Agile development 48
- 4.3 Empathizing with users' needs 50
- 4.4 Journey mapping 53
- 4.5 Ideation and evaluating possible solutions 57
- 4.6 Testing and validating 60
- 5.1 Release planning example 68
- 5.2 DoD example 70
- 5.3 Backlog refinement and prioritization 72
- 5.4 Backlog item and tasks 72
- 5.5 Self-organization in action 74
- 5.6 The pull-work system 75
- 5.7 When is something done? 76
- 5.8 Testing and validating through a review 77
- 5.9 Forecasting progress based on velocity 79
- 5.10 Team Retrospectives 80
- 5.11 Avoid developing low-value features 81
- 6.1 Example Kanban board 92
- 8.1 HR value canvas 106
- 8.2 Domains impacting business priorities 108
- 8.3 People and culture focus areas 109
- 8.4 SWOT analysis example 110
- 8.5 HR portfolio example 111
- 8.6 Risk versus value grid 113
- 8.7 MoSCoW method 114
- 8.8 Effort versus impact grid 115
- 8.9 Value matrix 115
- 8.10 Forced ranking 116

8.11	Bubble sorting	117
8.12	Reprioritizing the HR portfolio of work	118
9.1	Design thinking and Agile development	124
9.2	Persona template	129
9.3	Persona profile for Sonia	129
9.4	Persona profile for Stefan	130
9.5	Journey mapping template	130
9.6	Impact versus effort grid	137
9.7	Impact versus effort grid: onboarding example	137
10.1	Example Kanban board	155
10.2	Kanban with a strategic and BAU stream	156
10.3	Capacity planning for BAU versus strategic teamwork	156
10.4	Temporary people project squad	157
10.5	Design sprint Agile HR teams	158
10.6	People experience squads	159
10.7	People experience as a product	161
10.8	One-person Agile HR	163
10.9	No HR and temporary Agile HR squads	164
15.1	The Agile Network	212
15.2	Scaled Agile release trains	228
15.3	Example of an S@S organizational model	230
15.4	Tribes and squads	232

TABLES

3.1	Agile principles	38
4.1	Tools for the Empathize step	51
4.2	Tools for the Define step	54
4.3	Methods for the Ideate step	55
4.4	Prioritization methods	56
4.5	Popular methods for the Prototype step	58
9.1	Business challenge template	126
9.2	Using the business challenge template for the onboarding example	127
9.3	Problem statement template	135
9.4	Using the problem statement template for the onboarding example	135

PREFACE: AGILE HR AND THE AUTHORS

Natal

A turning point in my HR career was working as the Global Head of Talent at a large international bank and realizing that the time-consuming and difficult internal process I oversaw appeared to have little perceived value within the business. Over a period of almost six months we would ask managers at every level of the organization to painstakingly put their people into one of 25 talent boxes and then use the data to produce detailed reports for senior executives to review. While this alone might seem unproductive, what made it worse was the data didn't even seem to determine how people were selected for talent programmes or promotions. Indeed, most managers, including the senior executives, were fearful of discussing the information with employees and preferred instead to keep the whole process secret.

I've always believed there is a direct link between business success and inspired employees, and if given the right opportunity everyone has the potential to make a difference. Never a fan of hierarchy or adhering to the command and control ladder, at this point I became convinced that the main role of HR was to build great places to work, where people could be successful in their job and find purpose in their career. To achieve this, I also knew HR needed to move beyond traditional processes and begin to understand the human experience of work.

In search of this vision I decided to step out into the consulting world and, when asked to help a successful start-up evolve their performance and reward structure, I literally stumbled into Agile. With posters on the wall declaring 'No show ponies here' and 'We believe in the power of experimentation', I could sense from the minute I walked in the door this assignment would be different.

The project context reflects where a lot of tech departments are currently, with teams working Agile but still using a traditional approach to HR, for example with performance management based on managerial feedback, individual ratings and bonuses. Of course, I did what most HR consultants do and reviewed the engagement survey data, interviewed key people and looked at the best-practice examples from the industry. I then presented my masterplan to the sponsor and was dumbfounded when they asked: 'How do you know this will work?'

As I muttered stock phrases like ‘HR best practice’, I quickly realized that in this business, people were expected to validate decisions through experimentation and evidence, rather than through opinion or what was done before. Why should HR be any different?

Luckily, I was in the right environment to begin my Agile learning and people happily volunteered to participate in small, safe experiment teams that tested different ways to discuss and share feedback, use peer-based performance tools and even try different rating scales. After several months of listening and observing, we had the data to start making changes. The first was the removal of quarterly bonuses, based on evidence that performance conversations were heavily focused on money and ratings, rather than career development and feedback.

In the past, just contemplating such an organizational change would have led to a huge project involving months of approvals and committee meetings. Instead, I discovered that by working *with* people rather than *on* people it was possible to achieve cultural and behavioural change that everyone simply got on with, rather than spending months, even years resisting.

It was now clear to me why this company was way ahead of its competitors. Ever since I’ve been on a mission to equip the HR profession with Agile skills and prepare us for the future of work. My aim is to build awesome places to work where great people want to be, and by doing so enable business success. Through my role as a coach, consultant, and facilitator I’ve partnered closely with HR teams and business leaders from around the world to help them embrace an Agile mindset and reinvent how they work. This mission has led to some amazing experiences and an opportunity to collaborate with a wide range of different brands and industries.

In 2016 I hosted the first Agile HR Meetup in London with the aim of building a community of like-minded practitioners, which has since grown into a regular event held in cities across the world from Sydney to Paris as well as online. That same year I met Riina while tweeting my passion for Agile HR, and we made the commitment to positively disrupt the profession we love together.

Riina

During my fifth year as a student in chemical engineering, I began to realize I was no longer enthusiastic about a career in chemistry or pharma and needed to redirect my studies towards something that felt right. I came across studies in learning organizations and systems thinking and immediately

knew this is what I wanted to work with. After graduating, I aspired for a career in HR, ambitious to develop learning organizations and increase adaptability and self-directedness in work life. Though corporate reality and the traditional HR and management hierarchies toned down some of my idealism, they never put out the passion.

I worked a lot with frontline staff and managers, and started to understand their everyday work, their needs and their pain points. Many of the HR solutions we were offering were not appreciated at all. Realizing how broken the HR processes were for the users, I wanted to redesign HR. However, challenging the HR processes and management structures wasn't always that appreciated, and some considered me a bit of a rebel. Luckily, guided by a couple of coaching-oriented leaders early in my career, I could experiment and innovate within my own HR-domain. I designed self-organized, team-based onboarding programmes and started corporate communities and networks – before social media existed. Keen to bring much stronger customer focus and business relevance to HR and wanting to build company cultures where people can bring their full potential to work, I did feel like a misfit in the traditional, bureaucratic and hierarchical organization. Being an organizational innovator without seniority or a mandate was challenging.

That was until 2010 when I read the Scrum Guide. This was a life-changing moment as I realized I had been Agile my whole life. It felt like everything just clicked, a career 'love at first sight' moment. Scrum described the adaptive, organic, self-managed and customer-focused way of living that I had been advocating throughout my career. I predicted that the Agile way of working was going to spread from software development to other domains of work life, too, but did not expect it to take this long! Agile would challenge the dusty corporate structures I had been reimagining for a long time. This was the decisive moment I decided to quit my job and start my own company, offering Agile HR and Agile management consulting and training when there was none of that in the market.

A lot has happened since then. Today I advocate and influence for Agile HR and Agile organization development globally, consult and redesign organization's and HR team's operations. I work as an Agile enterprise coach helping executives, leadership teams and change programmes adopt the Agile mindset and practices, co-create their Agile transformation steps, and deliver value through new forms of organizational and management design. I also work with advanced people analytics development, advocating for evidence-based people leadership.

Meeting Natal, I found my Agile HR soulmate. She shares the same passion of redefining the whole profession of HR, reinventing work and creating an awesome employee experience. We found none of the IT-focused agilists could translate Agile to the HR context, and wanted to bring Agile alive to our peers, so we founded the Agile HR Community.

Together

This is the handbook we wish we had had when we first started to apply Agile HR within our own work. It brings to life all the learning we've gained from our personal experiences over the last decade, as well as the recommendations and insights from the leaders and teams we've collaborated with across the globe. We can't wait for you to put the handbook into practice and join our mission in transforming the HR profession for the future of work.

AGILE HR AND THE 2020 PANDEMIC

As we finished writing this book the coronavirus pandemic hit. Covid-19 is the biggest disruption most people have experienced to their working lives and it will most likely alter the business world forever. The crisis itself is still far from over as we write, with many countries remaining in lockdown, international travel at a complete standstill and most business meetings only possible via video conferencing.

The pandemic also serves as a great illustration of why organizations around the world, no matter the industry or size, require business agility to stay alive. Within days whole organizations were forced to shift their entire workforce to remote working just to remain in business. Many were also forced to make significant capacity decisions, such as the need to rapidly deploy people towards areas of the business now experiencing huge increases in demand, such as supermarkets or online retailers making hygiene products like hand sanitizer. Others faced the tough decision of completely shutting down, halting trade and furloughing workers. The fact these decisions were often underpinned by serious health and safety concerns made them even more challenging, with some organizations asking their employees to accept high personal risk just to keep essential services operating or care for vulnerable parts of society.

Covid-19 forced business to work Agile. Suddenly, everyone had to quickly assess their strategic business needs, what was happening for their end customer, not to mention the safety and well-being of their people, and rapidly reprioritize and pivot direction. They were also forced to do this incrementally and to quickly get a temporary plan up and running, knowing they would need to reassess and change the plan within weeks, sometimes days.

This need to pivot meant that organizations already using Agile practices were way ahead of their competitors. We've also been inspired by the many stories of HR teams using Agile to respond to the pandemic to keep their businesses operational and, most importantly, their people safe. Great examples include HR teams using Agile tools and collaboration methods to quickly refocus their work and get employee helplines and leader support mechanisms up and running within a matter of days. Often, this meant a need to embrace the concept of delivering MVP (minimum viable product) to quickly get something functional and valuable out to employees, which could then be incrementally improved once operational.

We also saw that organizations which had already embraced flexible working practices and used digital tools to visualize work and support transparent decisions making were able to simply keep going with everyone logging in from home. One Agile HR team even called every single worker in their organization to ensure people were safe and to assess which employees were most at risk and who required extra support to continue working from home. For this team it was then easy to onboard new employees virtually and welcome these people to the business while maintaining social distancing rules.

What's significant from all of these stories is how the Agile mindset and ways of working meant that these HR teams and organizations could trust each other to simply get on with the job despite the crisis happening around them. This meant it didn't matter if people could no longer physically see each other doing the work, because the Agile practices and tools they were using ensured information was shared, decisions were made transparently and work schedules were easily adjusted. Examples of this in action include agreeing times when people should be available online for video calls versus times in the working day when it is OK not be online, for instance caring for a child or going for a walk. For most, video call bombing by kids or pets has become the norm, as have bad haircuts and a casual dress code. For many of these Agile organizations a crucial activity throughout the crisis was senior leaders holding regular briefings to openly talk about their own stress from lockdown and the changing circumstances, a display of vulnerability that made it OK for others to take time out or ask for help.

The benefits of embracing an Agile mindset illustrated by Covid-19 exemplify how we hope this book will help HR professionals navigate the complexity of what is being labelled our new normal. As organizations reopen their doors under strange new social distance laws and limitations in how we trade and do business, HR teams around the world will need to use the tools and skills outlined in this book to respond. Charlotte Goulding, a leading Agile HR professional from Infinity Works, sums up the new Agile HR future perfectly:

In and among the chaos, it feels like a great time for a person-centred HR approach to show its value, to engage and look after people, and find new and varied ways of working to suit different people and their circumstances.

If HR can successfully take on this challenge, we have the opportunity of emerging on the other side of this pandemic with a new and modern world of work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Through our Agile HR adventures, we've been fortunate enough to collaborate and learn from some of the most inspiring, not to mention supersmart, people.

This book pays homage to all the wonderful trailblazers that have joined our mission and become an active member of the Agile HR Community. We are in awe of the things you do and the passion you display. Thank you for positively contributing to the future of the HR profession and being the momentum that keeps us going.

We also want to thank and show our deepest respect to our awesome Agile HR allies and collaborators from whom we've learnt so much. Your partnership has meant the world. Big shouts to Tracey Waters, Josh Bersin, Amanda Bellwood and Kate Rand, as well as the Agile HR Finland initial group, Baris Bal, Karen Beaven, Helen Blässar, Taina Blom-Bohner, Icar Castro, Nebel Crowhurst, Yusuf Okucu, Eoin Cannon, Luisa Colombo, Jennifer Dawson, Joanne Edwards, Mikko Eerola, Matias Fourment, Robert Frohman, Tudor Gandu, Tom Haak, Tina Harms, Jaakko Hartikainen, Petri Heiramo, Bee Heller, the Nuoret Henryt group, Lea Hejn, Alize Hofmeester, Sanna Hokkanen, Ari Jokilaakso, Joonas Kiminki, Esko Kokkonen, Eeva-Maria Kytönen, Cristina Leal, Jukka Lindström, Leila Ljungberg, Leonie Lübbers, Leena-Maija Ojala, Virpi Mattila-Manninen, Anna Marriott, Arto Miekkaavaara, Tamara Molinas, Marjaana Murtomaa, Wayne Mullen, Eija Niininen, James Perez, Emilie Piolroux, Kate Rand, Joanna Rosiek, Diana Russo, Melissa Sabella, Avril Scott, Rina Sirén, Cassie Soady, Luke Sondelski, Pia-Maria Thorén, Petteri Tuomimaa, Salvador Vartuli, Vesa Vuorinen and Jane Weir, and a special thanks to Jeff Sutherland.

