

Workforce Agility: An Executive Briefing

INNOVATORS' ROUNDTABLE SERIES

FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA'S DARDEN SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

“Volatility is here to stay ... The winners won't stop focusing on quality, cost, and efficiency, but they'll be paying a lot more attention to agility, too.”¹

C.K. Prahalad (1941–2010)

Everyone knows that truly agile employees enable an organization to innovate, create new markets and even lay the foundations for industries of the future. And yet, what do we really know about creating an agile workforce? Despite a body of work on organizational agility, surprisingly little research has addressed individual and team-based agility. This briefing examines the concept of workforce agility, explains why it is critical to enterprise survival, describes its attributes and provides a number of steps management can consider to foster it.

What Is Agility?

In the 1950s, agility was a hot topic in the field of air combat and was defined as “an aircraft’s ability to change maneuver state.”² John Boyd—a legendary Air Force fighter pilot who flew combat missions against Russian MiGs in Korea, created innovative methods of air and ground fighting, and helped develop the F-15 and F-16—believed that agility was even more important than power or speed.³

Later on, in the early 1990s, agility also became a popular concept in manufacturing. First introduced by the Iacocca Institute in a 1991 report, “21st Century Manufacturing Enterprise Strategy,” agile manufacturing was suggested as a response to the threat posed by the newly industrialized nations around the Pacific Rim—the so-called “Asian tigers.” The aim of agile manufacturing in the United States was to outperform overseas competition and to help the country regain the preeminence it had enjoyed prior to the emergence of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea as high-growth economies.⁴

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