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Individual Interpretation and Usefulness of Agility in Work and Everyday Life

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Abstract: The global and local changes of the 21st century have brought new types of organisational characteristics to the fore. More and more businesses are looking at how to build more resilient, crisis-resilient organisations and what the real key is. There is a growing consensus that only flexible organisations that are open to change can be truly successful today (and in the future). Flexible organisations, agile companies, promise the greatest growth potential, and there is only one real explanation for this. These companies have the ability to change quickly and flexibly, whereas the vast majority of their competitors have not (or will not) be able to do the same. An organisation that can claim to have the hallmarks of a flexible, business agile organisational culture will have a significant competitive advantage. Agility goes beyond mere flexibility and encompasses a mindset and framework that enables a business to change quickly, make informed decisions and maintain a competitive advantage in a dynamic environment. Agility is also characterised by innovation and the ability to embrace change. We can imagine these at an organisational level, but how well do they translate at an individual level? This research, the results of which this paper seeks to present in more detail, has sought to identify and locate this. In addition to presenting the results, it also takes care to review the literature, which will enable us to draw conclusions about the real meaning and importance of agility, both at the individual and entrepreneurial level.

Keywords: Agility, Competition, Change, Business

Introduction

The real competitive advantage of agile operators comes from flexibility and speed. In our fast-changing world, adaptation has become an essential condition to stay competitive. And to stay competitive, factors such as innovation, research and development, education and training, quality, etc. are the best tools to mitigate the effects of the crisis (Girod et al., 2023). Kotter predicted as early as 1996 that the pace of change would not slow down in the twenty-first century and that competition would increase dramatically in most industries. He was sure that businesses would face more serious threats - and opportunities - than ever before (Kotter, 1996). Adapting to the environment, adapting as quickly as possible, had already captured the attention of experts decades earlier: research on agility had been conducted since the 1930s and 1940s. The early descriptions focused on cybernetics, information theory, systems theory, operations research, TQM, the 6 sigma, reengineering and lean manufacturing. It is clear from this interpretation that agility was understood mostly in terms of corporate operations and less in relation to individuals. Today, we know that it is not only organisations that can be agile, but also individuals, among whom we can name employees, managers, and even in our everyday lives we can identify the characteristics of agility (Muduli & Pandya, 2018). However, agility

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can also be associated with individuals in many cases. In describing the characteristics of agility, one can also refer to great generals and military leaders, saying that to achieve agility, one needs a leader who inspires and encourages, but does not control much.

War strategies have very often required a combination of flexibility, variability or speed, to enable more effective military action and better mobilisation of units. The art of warfare was precisely what developed the agile thinking and attitudes of individuals, whereas today it is accelerated change and our turbulent world that explain its appreciation. Agility is closely linked to individuals, because an agile organisation is also made up of individuals and people. A business can become agile if it can identify agile actors, agile leadership and an agile organisational culture. It is through the behaviour, attitudes and behaviour of people that an organisation becomes what it is. Agile organisations are indeed different from traditional organisations. An agile organisation constantly analyses its environment, makes quick decisions, constantly looks for and corrects operational errors, and places a high value on constant learning and acquisition of new knowledge. It is people, individuals, who can make a meaningful contribution to all this, so each individual plays a central role in the process of becoming agile. In fact, organisational behaviour is nothing more than the cumulative behaviour of all those involved.

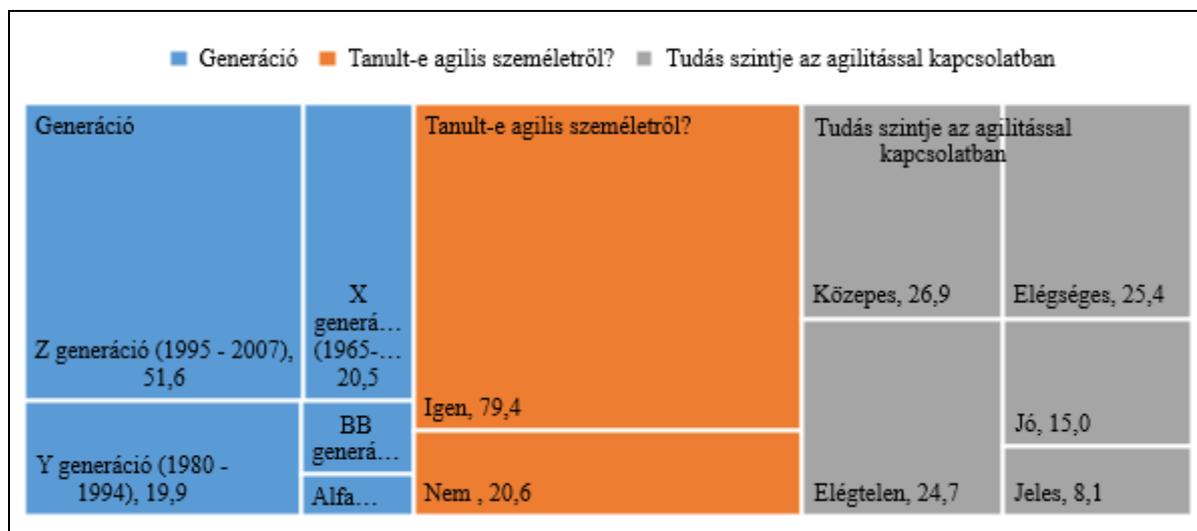
Literature Review

The 21st century has put our everyday lives on a completely new footing. How quickly and to what extent we can adapt to changes in our immediate or wider environment has become an important question. The reason is that while our world used to be characterised by a less fast and simpler (business) environment, the same can now be said in very few areas (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). What does it mean to be agile? To be flexible, changeable and fast at the same time. Agility is a talent (hence an important skill) that both makes you able to create new things (Dalcher, 2021) and more reactive to change. It requires being extremely open-minded, not being averse to new things and being receptive to change. Where individuals have high levels of uncertainty, are afraid of new things or have difficulty accepting change, agile functioning is more difficult to develop. An organisation will be agile if the individuals within it can become agile themselves. But its benefits are clear. Agility can bring benefits to the business such as lower costs, improved organisational performance, profitability and higher shareholder value. Flexible business models seek to implement the ability to change quickly and at moderate cost. The requirement for flexibility needs to be balanced with the costs of change (Denning, 2020). Business agility is a strategic issue, as ultimately it is management that can most influence how flexible the organisational structure becomes, what information is used to make decisions, or how quickly decisions are implemented that management has made to respond to change (Arifin & Purwanti, 2023). However, this does not mean that business agility is only the responsibility of management, as this type of behaviour requires a whole enterprise, as flexibility and agility must be ensured at all levels to achieve the desired results. And this cannot be achieved without committed and change-ready employees, collaborative partners or reliable suppliers. Alongside flexibility, speed is another important factor. Responsiveness is understood at both organisational and individual level. At the individual level, it can be expressed, for example, in the time it takes staff to complete a task, the time it takes to implement a change, or the time it takes to take a decision and put it into practice (Haeckel, 1999). Agility is also required in people, processes, strategy and technology, because they are inseparable and only together can they provide a continuous and dynamic response to the challenges of change. Agility means that the organisational structure is highly flexible, so that change does not cause difficulties for the organisation even if structural features need to be disrupted or reorganised. For change management, the agile business model provides attributes that can clearly benefit the success of change (Arbussa et al., 2017). Organisational flexibility, agility or variability can only be an advantage for change management, but only if resistance to change is minimised (Suprapti & Suparmi, 2022). The agile business model has also achieved great success in this respect, as it would not be able to sustain the dynamism of change if it were to face constant resistance from stakeholders. Agility is not an organisational capability that can be inherited or created out of thin air. The ability to be agile in business needs to be developed incrementally in the organisation, and the key to this is when the agile organisational culture is successfully built (Gren & Lenberg, 2020). Agility allows the organisation to implement change with the least possible resistance, while speed ensures that the benefits of change are captured earlier than everyone else (Zhou & Wu, 2010). And variability is the embodiment of the fact that individuals themselves do not shy away from change, even if they have a fundamental role to play, need to participate in the process and may have to make sacrifices and efforts in the change process. Agility is a strong presupposition of change, as it is indeed when the winds of change blow that we need to intervene quickly and flexibly (Prikladnicki et al., 2018). We can experience the same in our everyday lives. At the same time, those who are quickest to see and seize opportunities, adapt to change and do

so effectively are the ones who can develop the most (Dove, 2001). Success in business and in our personal lives depends to a large extent on our ability to identify the opportunities that surround us, or to know the environment that surrounds us. An agile mind is quick, resourceful and adaptable. Agile organisations are therefore responsive, resourceful and able to adapt to their environment (Mathiassen & Pries-Heje, 2006).

Composition of the Sample

In the present study, we measured the individual usefulness of agility by means of a complex, multi-topic questionnaire that, in addition to the challenges of the present, also attempts to measure basic competences (agility, conscious use of the Internet). The research was conducted in autumn 2023 and we draw our conclusions on the basis of a total of 5067 evaluable questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed by Generation X, Y and Z respondents, so we consider this as one of the most important grouping criteria. We also consider it important to examine the previous participation in agile education and the level of knowledge about agile, which is also considered as a relevant criterion. The survey was conducted online. The results presented in this paper are based on the questions of the first block of the questionnaire. In this study we want to show how respondents evaluate the impact of agility on themselves in their work in the organisation. Respondents were asked to rate the statements presented in the study using a four-point Likert scale, where a value of 1 represented total disagreement and a value of 4 represented total agreement, providing the option to decline to respond, which was taken into account in the rating with a value of 0. More than half of our respondents are Generation Z, 20-20% are Generation X and Y, and a total of 5.2% are Generation BB and 2.9% are Generation Alpha. Some form of agility was taught to 80% of the respondents in the sample, but only a quarter of respondents overall rated their knowledge as good to excellent. The composition of the sample is shown in the figure below.



Source: Own research, 2023, N = 5067

Figure 1. Composition of the sample by respondents' generation, participation in agility education and knowledge of agility

Results

In this study, we wanted to examine four claims in detail along the three grouping criteria above. It can be seen that the highest proportion of respondents perceive the individual usefulness of agility in helping to change the general mindset of employees. This was followed by a relatively high rating for the factor that agility helps to improve collaboration between peers. A much lower proportion rated agility as helping to increase employee engagement and reduce the frequency of conflicts. For all four statements, none of them scored above 3.0. While the first two statements tend to be at the positive end of the scale, the last statements, on employee engagement and reducing the incidence of conflict, are not so positively rated.

We then used analysis of variance to assess the extent to which each grouping criterion influences the perception of the statements. To this end, we used a one-way ANOVA, the tables of which are shown below, together with

the descriptive tables. First, we examined respondents' generational affiliation. It can be seen that the significance values indicate that the age of the respondents has a clear influence on all four statements t, as is clearly shown by the significance level below 5%.

Table 1. Overall perception of questions on agility

	Average	Source
helps to make cooperation between partner areas more effective	2,771	1,212
changes the general mindset of workers	2,729	1,192
increases employee engagement	2,532	1,210
reduces the frequency of conflicts	2,457	1,186

Source: Own research, 2023, N = 5067

Table 2. Correlation of respondents' perceptions of agility questions with their age

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
helps to make cooperation between partner areas more effective	Between Groups	142,769	4	35,692	24,736	0,000
	Within Groups	7304,211	5062	1,443		
	Total	7446,980	5066			
changes the general mindset of workers	Between Groups	86,006	4	21,501	15,312	0,000
	Within Groups	7108,037	5062	1,404		
	Total	7194,043	5066			
increases employee engagement	Between Groups	49,831	4	12,458	8,564	0,000
	Within Groups	7363,772	5062	1,455		
	Total	7413,603	5066			
reduces the frequency of conflicts	Between Groups	21,033	4	5,258	3,744	0,005
	Within Groups	7110,208	5062	1,405		
	Total	7131,241	5066			

Source: Own research, 2023, N = 5067

Table 3. Perception of agility questions by generation

		Average	Source
helps to make cooperation between partner areas more effective	Generation BB (1940 - 1964)	2,393	1,371
	Generation X (1965-1979)	2,857	1,225
	Generation Y (1980 - 1994)	2,826	1,186
	Generation Z (1995 - 2007)	2,798	1,170
	Alfa generation (2008-)	1,980	1,358
	Total	2,771	1,212
changes the general mindset of workers	Generation BB (1940 - 1964)	2,385	1,362
	Generation X (1965-1979)	2,869	1,158
	Generation Y (1980 - 1994)	2,756	1,203
	Generation Z (1995 - 2007)	2,725	1,154
	Alfa generation (2008-)	2,250	1,428
	Total	2,729	1,192
increases employee engagement	Generation BB (1940 - 1964)	2,363	1,331
	Generation X (1965-1979)	2,577	1,223
	Generation Y (1980 - 1994)	2,504	1,228
	Generation Z (1995 - 2007)	2,569	1,170
	Alfa generation (2008-)	2,041	1,329
	Total	2,532	1,210
reduces the frequency of conflicts	Generation BB (1940 - 1964)	2,313	1,296
	Generation X (1965-1979)	2,509	1,157
	Generation Y (1980 - 1994)	2,419	1,216
	Generation Z (1995 - 2007)	2,480	1,162
	Alfa generation (2008-)	2,196	1,364
	Total	2,457	1,186

Source: Own research, 2023, N = 5067

We also examined the generational ranking along the results. The statements show that the highest average score, i.e. the most positive opinion for each factor, was obtained from members of generation X. They were followed in order by Generation Y respondents and Generation Z respondents. As members of the BB generation and the alpha generation were very under-represented in the sample, their opinions are not discussed in detail. It can be seen, therefore, that it is the respondents who have been involved in the world of work for a long time and have a stable career who have the most positive opinions about the individual usefulness of agility. One might expect that Generation Z, who are the most free and flexible, would be the most positive about these factors, but the sample does not confirm this assumption. Next, we examined the impact of participation in agile education on our statements based on the results of the analysis of variance. Here, we were surprised to find that the significance values showed that there was only one case of an influential effect on the statements. Only the respondents' participation in agile education had an influence on the frequency of conflict occurrence, since only in this case the significance value was below 5%.

Table 4. Correlation of respondents' perceptions of agility questions with their participation in agile education

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
helps to make cooperation between partner areas more effective	Between Groups	0,321	1	0,321	0,219	0,640
	Within Groups	7446,659	5065	1,470		
	Total	7446,980	5066			
changes the general mindset of workers	Between Groups	2,895	1	2,895	2,039	0,153
	Within Groups	7191,148	5065	1,420		
	Total	7194,043	5066			
increases employee engagement	Between Groups	1,532	1	1,532	1,047	0,306
	Within Groups	7412,070	5065	1,463		
	Total	7413,603	5066			
reduces the frequency of conflicts	Between Groups	6,127	1	6,127	4,355	0,037
	Within Groups	7125,115	5065	1,407		
	Total	7131,241	5066			

Source: Own research, 2023, N = 5067

If we break down the respondents by participation in agile education, we see that the order is not clear, i.e. the respondents are very heterogeneous. Respondents who participated in agile education rated the statement on collaboration most positively only. Surprisingly, for all other statements, respondents who did not participate in agile education gave higher average ratings to the factors. This result is interesting because one would expect that those who have attended training on agile methodology would have a better understanding of its essence and would report more positively about it. This suggests that although respondents had attended agile training, they were more aware of the organisational effectiveness of agile, or even its role in project management, rather than the positive effects they experienced for themselves.

Table 5. Perceptions of agility-related questions in groups trained on the basis of participation in agile education

		Average	Source
helps to make cooperation between partner areas more effective	No	2,755	1,219
	Yes	2,775	1,211
	Total	2,771	1,212
changes the general mindset of workers	No	2,776	1,172
	Yes	2,717	1,197
	Total	2,729	1,192
increases employee engagement	No	2,566	1,173
	Yes	2,523	1,219
	Total	2,532	1,210
reduces the frequency of conflicts	No	2,525	1,163
	Yes	2,439	1,192
	Total	2,457	1,186

Source: Own research, 2023, N = 5067

Last but not least, we also looked at the extent to which the level of knowledge about agility influenced the questions. Here again, we found that each factor was significantly influenced by the perception of one's own knowledge of agile approaches.

Table 6. Correlation between respondents' perceptions of agility questions and their knowledge of agile

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
helps to make cooperation between partner areas more effective	Between Groups	81,437	4	20,359	13,992	0,000
	Within Groups	7365,544	5062	1,455		
	Total	7446,980	5066			
changes the general mindset of workers	Between Groups	133,182	4	33,295	23,870	0,000
	Within Groups	7060,861	5062	1,395		
	Total	7194,043	5066			
increases employee engagement	Between Groups	96,350	4	24,087	16,663	0,000
	Within Groups	7317,253	5062	1,446		
	Total	7413,603	5066			
reduces the frequency of conflicts	Between Groups	106,158	4	26,539	19,123	0,000
	Within Groups	7025,084	5062	1,388		
	Total	7131,241	5066			

Source: Own research, 2023, N = 5067

In the present case, we would expect that those with good or excellent knowledge would be the most likely to report on these factors. However, we find that it is not respondents who rated their knowledge as excellent or excellent who gave the highest ratings to each factor, but respondents who rated their knowledge more modestly, in the fourth category, good. This is true for all factors without exception. It is clear that those whose knowledge was unsatisfactory rated their individual utility the lowest, which is entirely in line with the general perception.

Table 7. Perceptions of agility-related questions in groups based on knowledge of agile knowledge

		Average	Source
helps to make cooperation between partner areas more effective	Insufficient	2,576	1,314
	Sufficient	2,777	1,128
	Medium	2,823	1,157
	Good	2,968	1,168
	Excellent	2,806	1,326
	Total	2,771	1,212
changes the general mindset of workers	Insufficient	2,456	1,295
	Sufficient	2,756	1,099
	Medium	2,847	1,104
	Good	2,882	1,155
	Excellent	2,806	1,350
	Total	2,729	1,192
increases employee engagement	Insufficient	2,334	1,313
	Sufficient	2,486	1,123
	Medium	2,655	1,144
	Good	2,711	1,168
	Excellent	2,539	1,335
	Total	2,532	1,210
reduces the frequency of conflicts	Insufficient	2,231	1,267
	Sufficient	2,431	1,108
	Medium	2,573	1,122
	Good	2,624	1,161
	Excellent	2,527	1,317
	Total	2,457	1,186

Source: Own research, 2023, N = 5067

Conclusions

The results show that knowledge about the individual utility of agility is still in its infancy. The vast majority of respondents have attended training on agility, but have not yet seen or experienced its individual benefits. This

can be clearly seen from the maximum of the mean scores. None of the statements measuring individual usefulness reached a value of 3.0, supporting the above. It can also be observed that the generation most at the forefront is Generation X, who have been exposed to a variety of approaches and methodologies through their work experience. It is worth prioritising this generation, as they are the ones who can disseminate and explain the essence and usefulness of agility at individual and organisational level. It was also observed that a relatively small proportion of respondents considered their knowledge of agility to be excellent. It is therefore interesting to note that the most positive image was that of respondents who rated their own knowledge as good. Although more than half of the sample was made up of Generation Z, it is important to see that they are not the ones who would be at the forefront. This is important because 21st century education needs to find the competencies that the labour market demands. This is perfectly illustrated by the Generation X view. It is therefore essential that members of Generation X act as mentors to Generation Z young people, who are able to pass on, disseminate and teach agile thinking to members of the younger generation who will be pillars of the future labour market.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

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