Liberating Decision Making

In today's fast-moving environment, businesses need to respond quickly to customer demands. **Emma Carroll** asks senior leaders how they are adapting their approach to satisfy this 24-7 culture and stay competitive

A beachwear trend spawned by the latest reality TV show; your competitor's surprise launch of a game-changing app; a customer complaint gaining 3am-traction on social media – in today's 24-7 market, businesses need to respond quickly. So, how do you create agile structures and mindsets to make it happen?

Julian Goldsmith, Senior Relationship Manager at Criticaleye, says that CEOs, CFOs and HRDs must look to the skills that will serve the needs of their most important stakeholder. "Customers are demanding that organisations interact with them in a different way. They want instant, right-first-time, personalised service, delivered on their platform of choice," he says. "To satisfy today's tech-enabled consumer, businesses need agile employees who are empowered to make decisions and innovate."

Kevin Brady, Director of HR and Communications at Openreach, is currently taking the digital network provider on such a journey. This is within a business that he admits was "historically an engineering-led organisation [where] the engineering at times was more important than the customer outcome".

He explains: "At a structural level, we are redesigning our operational teams to push accountability and decision making closer to the frontline. We have moved from a very centralised, command-and-control operating model, with decisions being made in HQ … [and] are shifting decisions around budgets and resources to the local management teams who will decide how the work gets done to support customers."

> **"** *To satisfy today's tech-enabled consumer, businesses need agile employees who are empowered to make decisions and innovate* **"**

The business has also restructured local teams and put in place 'patch leads' who Kevin says, "will be responsible for the day-to-day issues around quality of work, which should enable more freedom for our first line managers to lead more effectively". Alongside this, Openreach has introduced increasingly customer-focused internal comms, new training for those working directly with customers and a leadership programme for frontline managers.

"As HRD it is my role to challenge thinking – bringing different perspectives and ensuring that the customer is front and centre of the decisions the collective leadership team makes," he says.

Gareth Jones, Group HRD at M&GPrudential, has used a spectrum of practices to produce a more responsive workforce. "In some areas we have

introduced full Agile methodology while in others we have focused on 'agile' with a small 'a'," he says. "Here the focus has been on creating flexibility and maximising manager and team discretion, as well as adult-to-adult judgement over how, when and where people work."

Gareth says that these working practices are about facilitating "flexibility with accountability" and are backed up by toolkits, role modelling by senior leaders and a "clear and strong etiquette" to ensure that everyone knows where and when other team members are working. "It's about communication, shifting mindsets through the example set by leadership and introducing technologies and workplace environments that people find enabling," he states.

Technology as a Tool

Technology is shaping what customers are demanding, but it is also allowing businesses to serve them more effectively. **Devyani Vaishampayan**, NED at BQF, says: "Digital solutions involving machine learning are playing a key role in creating a more agile workplace. They allow information to flow across employees in a 'networked' rather than a hierarchical manner.

"Having this information on a real-time basis – as opposed to when the organisation sees fit to release it – is fundamentally changing the manager-employee relationship and allowing employees to make decisions and innovate proactively," she says.

This tech also supports decisions based on forward-looking, predictive data, rather than historical information, **>**

which enables your people "to take action before an issue becomes serious – which is the definition of agile," **Devyani** says.

Another specific example of AI supporting a more agile workforce is in the provision of learning and development. Traditionally this was delivered as courses and later moved to online content housed on learning management systems.

Today, **Devyani** explains, AI can offer a much more active approach. It can look at job specs and create a training plan for an individual; curate suitable internal and external content; understand that individual's preferred learning style; and then tailor the learning experience appropriately. It can also give

> **" Agility in organisations cannot be a one-time effort but has to be facilitated on a regular basis "**

managers live insight into which resources employees are using and provide intel on cost effectiveness.

"This automatically leads to the upskilling of employees on a regular basis and development being led by them as opposed to a top-down approach," she says. "Agility in organisations cannot be a one-time effort but has to be facilitated on a regular basis."

Any change that fundamentally alters the way people work and requires a shift in corporate culture will be tough, but it is crucial if a business wants to fend off nimble competitors hungry for today's switch-happy customers. Business leaders need to meet this challenge head on.

"HRDs will always face inertia and middle-management resistance, but it is about creating critical mass and using stories about teams working more agilely, effectively and with better customer outcomes," **Gareth** says.

"It also involves tearing up and simplifying many outdated and restrictive HR policies in favour of some key principles and a focus on judgement, discretion and trust." ■

Amy Finn
Transformation and Organisational Agility Expert, PA Consulting

COMMUNITY COMMENT

HRDs play a critical role in coaching leaders to adopt a fundamentally new approach, shifting culture and making 'being' agile a reality. PA's research with over 500 leaders from global businesses found five dimensions of agility that make organisations more financially successful:

- **Centre on your customer –** agile organisations put the customer at the heart of everything they do

- **Speed up time to value –** HR plays a critical role in speeding up time to value through effective onboarding and training

- **Design for simplicity –** organisations with complex or hierarchical structures and processes will find it difficult to increase their agility

- **Build to evolve –** the ability for your organisation to flex with changing internal and external factors is a key differentiator in beating the competition

- **Liberate your people –** agile organisations recruit talented, capable individuals whose capability needs to be liberated, not constrained

Organisations on the journey to becoming more agile often look to the technical challenge first – setting up scrum teams and working in time boxes. As agile practices mature, it's people, culture and leadership that quickly become the constraining factors in increasing velocity and delivering success.

Featuring Commentary From:

Kevin Brady
Director of HR and Communications
Openreach

Julian Goldsmith
Senior Relationship Manager
Criticaleye

Gareth Jones
Group HRD
M&GPrudential

Devyani Vaishampayan
NED
BQF

Contact the contributors through:
www.criticaleye.com