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**ENHANCING ORGANIZATIONAL AGILITY WITHIN THE HUMAN
RESOURCES FUNCTION**

A Research Project

**Presented to the Faculty of
Pepperdine Graziadio Business School**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science
in
Organizational Development**

**by
Nathan Bushey
August 2019**

This research project, completed by

NATHAN BUSHEY

under the guidance of the Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the faculty of Pepperdine Graziadio Business School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE
IN ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Date: August 2019

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Abstract

Organizational agility describes a firm's dexterity in making necessary changes to sustain and enhance performance. This mixed methods study examined the nature of agility and the impacts of internal processes on agility within the human resources (HR) function of a telecommunications organization in the United States. Both survey and interview data were collected. Quantitative data were collected and statistically analyzed. Qualitative insights were coded to identify trends in the respective datasets. Study findings indicate the case organization had a moderate degree of agility and that its attunement to the external environment was variable. The data also suggested that leadership style, organizational culture, strategic planning, and communications were four key barriers to creating agility within the HR function. Recommendations to the case organization, organization development practitioners seeking to help HR organizations enhance agility, and researchers are offered.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Change can be difficult for any individual or organization (Rock & Schwartz, 2006). While many models exist to structure, guide, and facilitate change, such as Deming's Cycle of Plan, Do, Check, Adjust (Tague, 2005) or Kotter's (2012) Eight-Step change model, organizations and their members do not always follow these effectively or completely. An organization's ability to anticipate and adapt to change determines its *agility*, meaning its ability to make timely, effective, and sustained changes while maintaining superior performance (Worley, Williams, & Lawler, 2014). Agility is rapidly becoming accepted as one of the most important characteristics of successful organizations in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. Being agile requires the enactment of long-term, sustained behaviors.

For example, agility is demonstrated when organizations make routine adjustments in response to external environmental demands. Such adjustments may include launching new products or eliminating old ones, entering new markets or exiting underperforming ones, or building new capabilities. Williams, Worley, and Lawler (2016) outline four routines of agility that distinguish high-performing organizations from low-performers: (a) strategizing dynamically, which means developing a sense of shared purpose, robust and differentiating strategic intent, and a change-friendly yet stable identity; (b) perceiving environmental change, which means attending to, interpreting, understanding, and internally communicating about external environmental cues; (c) testing responses, which means knowing and taking advantage of available resources and readily deploying these to experiment with new ideas; and (d)

implementing change, which means converting successful tests into widespread practices in a rapid and efficient manner.

Although many organizational leaders understand the need for agility, and there is a growing theoretical underpinning of the concept, practical approaches are lacking to guide organizational leaders in helping organizations become agile. Due to the importance of organizational agility for success and the difficulty in enacting and sustaining change, it is critical to understand the nature of agility within an organization, barriers to agility, and methods by which an organization may increase its agility. This study focuses on understanding one routine of agility (i.e., perceiving environmental change) at one organization as a starting point for developing practical approaches to improve agility within that organization. The perceiving routine was selected because if an organization does not have strong perceiving behaviors, it may feel disconnected from the rest of the business or market. Lack of attention to the business or market can cause the organization to miss trends or information critical to performance, potentially resulting in an overall performance decline. It may also cause the organization to become highly reactive, adding stress in a number of areas.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of agility and impacts of internal processes on the human resources (HR) function of a telecom organization.

Three research questions guided the design of this study:

1. How do members of the HR organization define the concept of agility and how do they rate the level of agility of the function?
2. How do members of the HR organization rate their organization's ability to perceive its environment?

3. To what extent do HR processes and practices contribute to the organization's agility?

Study Setting

This study was conducted within the HR function of a US-based telecommunication company. The HR function employs approximately 600 professionals nationwide; 35 of these are on a team managed by the principal researcher. The HR function of the case organization is primarily organized in two groups: (a) HR Crews, which are business-facing and business-aligned teams responsible for HR business partner support, recruiting, and leadership development and (b) HR Back Office teams, which do not generally align to specific areas of the business and instead support enterprise-wide operations, program and vendor management, and other work best supported by centralized teams. Current processes for perceiving the environment vary across HR related to these groups. HR Crews are well aligned to the business they support and, as a result, are intimately familiar with that business unit's strategies, initiatives, and objectives. HR Back Office teams do not directly align with the business and may be more disconnected. Challenges may exist in the aggregation, synthesis, and distribution of information between teams within HR and between HR and the broader company.

Significance of the Study

The perceiving routine is important for building behaviors that help organization members better understand the company's environment, producing insights for more informed action and higher performance. This study adds practical insights to the research on organizational agility routines, specifically as it relates to cultivating perceiving the environment agility routines within organizations. The case organization

as well as OD practitioners and similar organizations may benefit from the insights and recommendations that emerge from this study.

Organization of the Study

This chapter provided a background to the study. In addition, the purpose statement, research setting, and study significance were provided.

Chapter 2 provides a review of relevant literature. Theory and research related to organizational agility are reviewed first. This section includes a definition of organizational agility, a discussion of its importance and origins, history of the concept, how it manifests in organizations, and what its implications are. The telecommunications industry is then reviewed, including an overview of industry trends and a profile of industry leaders. The need for organizational agility in the U.S. telecommunications industry is considered. The HR function in telecommunications organizations is discussed, including an overview of its function and importance to the broader organization. Particular attention is given to creating organizational agility within these departments.

Chapter 3 describes the methods that were used. The research design and procedures related to the survey, interview, data analysis, and human subjects protections are outlined.

Chapter 4 reports the findings of the study. The outcomes of the survey research and themes that emerged from the interviews are presented.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings. The purpose statement and objectives are restated, followed by a summary of the key findings. Conclusions based on the findings are presented, followed by recommendations for managers, similar

organizations, and organizational development practitioners. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research also are outlined.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of agility and impacts of internal processes on the HR function of a telecom organization. This chapter provides a review of relevant literature organized by major concepts of organizational agility, the telecommunications industry, and the HR function. Theory and research related to organizational agility are reviewed and defined, along with discussion of its importance and origins, how it manifests in organizations, and its implications are.

Second, the telecommunications industry is discussed to provide context for the case in this study. Key definitions of the industry are provided and major industry trends are reviewed. Industry leaders are profiled and the need for organizational agility in the U.S. telecommunications industry is considered.

Finally, the HR function is discussed. Its importance to the larger organization is outlined and unique HR considerations within the telecommunications industry are discussed. Concepts of organizational agility within HR are introduced.

Organizational Agility

Organizational agility indicates a company's dexterity making the changes needed to sustain and enhance performance (Worley et al., 2014). Agile organizations are effective in that they are able to adapt to ongoing shifts in their environments. This may mean adapting their services, products, or other offerings, adjusting their business model, or shifting their set of capabilities to best capitalize on market opportunities and respond to threats.

Organizational agility has two distinct dimensions: flexibility and adaptability (Falance, 2012; Holsapple & Li, 2008). Flexibility indicates the degree to which the

organization has the ability and exhibits the willingness to exercise a range of potential options for achieving success, which includes identifying alternatives, overcoming inertia, and rising to meet unstructured challenges and unanticipated changes. In short, flexibility enables the organization to deal with the unexpected. Central to flexibility is refraining from fully committing or overextending the organization's resources. Such conditions limit the organization's ability to remain aware and responsive to internal and external threats and events.

Adaptability refers to the responses and decisions an organization makes in relation to environmental stimuli (Harraf, Wanasika, Tate, & Talbott, 2015). Importantly, these stimuli occur internally and externally to the organization; therefore, adaptability requires organizational capabilities to know, sense, anticipate, plan, and understand as much as possible about the world around it. Both flexibility and adaptability require a complementary set of strategies and organizational structures, systems, and processes (Worley et al., 2014).

Research also suggests that organizations require a stable backbone in addition to flexibility and adaptability (Aghina, De Smet, & Weerda, 2015). Organizations with strong structure, governance, and process foundations can add dynamic capabilities like resource allocation, decision delegation, or collaborative team structures to increase their ability to be agile in the market. Agility also requires management processes that can support adaptability over time, such as regular review of organizational processes and leadership assessment, to assure that both are aligned with principles of agility (Worley et al., 2014).

Importance of agility. Agility is known as one of the most important characteristics of successful organizations in standing out in the volatile, uncertain,

complex, and ambiguous world (Glenn, 2009). The primary objective of organizational agility is to drive sustained, above-average performance (Worley et al., 2014). Moreover, organizational agility is a critical dynamic capability that influences a firm's competitive actions; therefore, it becomes a significant antecedent of performance (Felipe, Roldan, & Leal-Rodruiguez, 2017; Sambamurthy, Bharadwaj, & Grover, 2003).

Working from the framework proposed by Worley et al. (2014), a key feature in agile organization design is a robust strategy characterized by its ability to generate results under varying environmental conditions. Robust strategies have three elements: an alternative economic logic, a strong future focus, and flexible intent (Worley & Lawler, 2010).

Alternative economic logic means departing from conventional concepts of organizational success that presuppose stability (e.g., in task environments and industry structures) and achieving sustainable competitive advantages as key to superior performance. Instead, agile design dictates that short-term performance emerges from temporary competitive advantages, and long-term performance results from cumulative successful cycles of such advantages. Worley and Lawler further assert that agile organizations are reliably positioned to deliver better results throughout the ebbs and flows of business cycles, political change, disruptive technologies, and other competitive forces.

Agile organizations tend to have a strong future focus and have the ability to develop potential futures through the creation of short- and long-term scenarios. Scenario planning may be easier for agile organizations because of their intrinsically adaptable designs. They are also less likely to be surprised by external factors.

Flexible intent is the third aspect of the robust strategy (Worley & Lawler, 2010). The idea of flexible intent is that the agile organization can allocate its resources to realize the momentary advantage described above and then reconfigure and redeploy them as needed to address ever-changing market conditions. Agile organizations embrace changing to the environment as a way of life rather than bothersome events that will soon pass.

History of the concept. To understand the origin of organizational agility, we must look at the evolution of manufacturing methodologies over time. While people have been creating products since ancient times, manufacturing can be categorized into several distinct categories, two of which (i.e., craft manufacturing and mass production) are relatively modern inventions.

Craft manufacturing was one of the earliest paradigms of the production world. Craft production enabled humankind to produce products in low volume through a few specialized resources. This model of product creation was the functional paradigm for thousands of years until the industrial revolution in the 19th century when machines enabled the introduction of mass production.

Mass production enabled humankind to produce large volumes through many unspecialized resources. This model was further amplified by Ford, General Motors, and others in the 1920s, and is often credited for the rapid growth of the U.S. economy during and post-World War II. In the 1960s, forces like global trade and fuel shortages forced organizations to adopt lean manufacturing concepts that were focused on reducing the waste and errors abundant in the classic mass production paradigm.

Agility and agile manufacturing stem from lean manufacturing (Harraf et al., 2015). These were born out of necessity in the 1980s as a manufacturing paradigm as

increasing competition and differentiation required mass production, the dominant methodology, to make products better, faster, and cheaper (Thilak, Devadasan, & Sivaram, 2015). The term *agile manufacturing* was first coined by the Iacocca Institute in 1991 (Razmi & Ghasemi, 2015). Agile manufacturing focuses on producing products based on customers' dynamic needs. A key aspect of this methodology is that it enables an organization to supply products according to the choice and specification of the customer (Thilak et al., 2015).

The concept rapidly gained recognition among practitioners and researchers in its application to the broader enterprise where similar flexibility was needed to better address changing market conditions and help organizations compete.

Organizational manifestations of agility. Agility is not just the ability to change. Instead, it is a cultivated capability that enables an organization to respond in a timely, effective, and sustainable way when changing circumstances require it (Williams, Worley, & Lawler, 2013). When one frames agility as a capability, it is easier to think about how it manifests, grows, and evolves within an organization, as depicted by Worley et al.'s (2014) concept of an Agility Pyramid (see Figure 1).

The first layer, Management Practices, is all about leaders' behaviors and the processes, policies, and frameworks through which business is conducted. This includes goal setting, developing budgets, and recognizing and rewarding performance. The middle layer, Capabilities, describes what an organization can do. This has to do with the business processes that help the organization deliver value better, faster, or cheaper than their competitors and ultimately helps them win. In turn, agile organizations are able to change their capabilities to meet new demands. The top of the pyramid represents the institutionalized ability to operate differently where they create a performance advantage

(Worley et al., 2014). For these organizations, four routines of agility distinguish high-performing organizations from low-performers: Strategizing Dynamically, Perceiving Environmental Change, Testing Responses, and Implementing Change.



Note. Based on *The Agility Factor: Building Adaptable Organizations for Superior Performance*, by C. G. Worley, T. Williams, and E. E. Lawler, III, 2014, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Figure 1

The Agility Pyramid

Strategizing Dynamically differs from traditional strategy in that there are three explicit parts: a sense of shared purpose, a change-friendly identity that is stable enough to ground the organization, and a robust strategic intent that clarifies how the firm differentiates itself (Williams et al., 2013).

Perceiving Environmental Change is the notion that agile companies pay attention to what is going on in the environment around them, accurately interpret and understand their observations, and communicate effectively within the organization so teams and leaders can take action.

Agile organizations refine their insights from their perceiving routines with a relatively high number of low-cost experiments. They encourage innovation and tolerate a good deal of failure (Williams et al., 2013) with the overall objective to identify the best possible solution or approach to change. Testing requires the organization to take advantage of available resources and quickly deploy them to experiment with new ideas. It also requires the organization to have a relatively high tolerance for risk and enough discipline to resist being discouraged from small failures. Lastly, the organization must learn from every iteration and continuously incorporate the findings into future work. This creates a virtuous cycle whereby the organization can continue to evolve.

Implementing change is the final routine for agile organizations. This routine means converting successful tests into widespread practices in a rapid and efficient manner. Successful implementation requires every employee within the organization to understand and adopt the new product, process, or behavior quickly and is dependent on the shared sense of purpose and change-friendly identity previously described.

McKinsey thought leaders further expanded on the notion of the Agility Pyramid and underscored the importance of the first and second layer of the pyramid as keys to creating stability within an agile organization. They explained that genuinely agile organizations are able to balance both stability, characterized by resilience, reliability, and efficiency, with dynamism, characterized by speed, adeptness, and adaptiveness (Aghina et al., 2015). Additionally, agility and its manifestations may be depicted in organizational artifacts, such as mission, vision or values statements, company handbooks and policies, and new hire and training materials.

Implications of organizational agility. Agile organizations use the routines at the top of the agility pyramid to operate differently from traditional companies in a

variety of ways, including in their organizational structures, governance and decision-making frameworks, and internal processes. For example, whereas traditional hierarchies typically specify where work gets done, how performance is measured, and how communication flows through an organization or team, agile organizations may deliberately choose which dimension of the organization structure will be their primary one (Aghina et al., 2015). In turn, employee work assignments, reporting relationships, development paths, and performance evaluation processes may cut across the formal reporting structure. These working teams tend to be ad hoc, meaning they form to meet new business demands and dissolve upon completion of the scope of work. Agile companies have learned that the stability of an organizational home is critical because it helps companies reallocate employees in less successful cells more easily and rapidly, with little of the disruption and fear over job losses that traditionally deter and hinder change.

Governance and decision-making are other aspects of agility that manifest in everyday work. McKinsey stated that the idea behind agile governance is to establish simultaneously stable and dynamic decision-making practices. They outlined three types of decisions: Type 1, big decisions with high stakes; Type 2, frequent decisions that require cross-unit dialogue and collaboration; and Type 3, decisions that should be parsed into smaller ones and delegated as far down as possible (Aghina et al., 2015). They further clarified that Type 2 decisions are topics that typically impede organizational agility. An organization's values or guiding principles as described above may also play a significant role in decision-making at any level. With these facts in mind, it is critical for an organization to make conscious choices about decision rights and communicate them throughout the organization.

Having a robust and stable set of internal processes and a common language to communicate with is another key element of stability within an organization that manifests in day-to-day work. One source of stability is found in the company's signature processes in which they excel. These internal processes may span a wide-variety of tasks. Standardizing these processes by assuring that everyone understands how key tasks are performed, clarifying who is responsible and accountable for specific units of work, and using a common language to describe the work, can further unlock organizational agility and increase competitors' difficulties in replicating such processes (Aghina et al., 2015). In contrast, lack of stability in these internal processes can lead to confusion, duplication of effort, and inefficiencies throughout the organization, thus compromising agility.

Telecommunications Industry

The telecommunications industry (telecom), a subset of the information and communication technology sector, consists of all companies responsible for making communication possible through a variety of means, methods, and technologies. These companies are responsible for the creation, management, and evolution of the infrastructure that enables information to be sent anywhere on the planet.

The industry has evolved from the telegraph in the mid-19th century to a litany of products and services in the modern era where billions of people daily benefit from always-on wireless connectivity on their personal devices.

Telecom consists of five primary segments: infrastructure and platform vendors, device and hardware vendors, operators, over-the-top content and advertising, and retail and distribution. The industry operates through a variety of technologies—most commonly, radio, television, cable, satellite, phone, wireless and internet services. Depending on the business model, companies may operate in one or more segments,

technologies, or services. Because of its ubiquity in society, many telecom services are considered utilities.

Technological advances have made it possible for humans to collaborate in real-time, trade goods and services internationally, and stay connected with friends, family, and loved ones around the globe. This technological revolution has been one of the primary forces behind globalization and the flattening of the world over the last two centuries. Introduction of the telegraph in 1816 enabled messages to be transmitted in hours rather than days or weeks. The telephone, introduced in 1876, made real-time voice communication possible across great distances. Commercial broadcast radio services began in the 1920s, followed by television in the 1930-1940s. The first computer networks, precursors to the modern internet, were developed in the 1960s, thus enabling data to be transmitted between computers. The 1970s featured the development of the wireless phone. In 1981, the first global standard for interconnected networks was established, which paved the way for internet service providers to emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These technologies have evolved and combined over the last 30 years, leading to the advent of (the now ubiquitous) smartphone in the early 2000s.

Telecom is a highly capital-intensive industry, with high fixed costs that present a challenge for new industry entrants. As a result, many of the technologies and services taken for granted today originated in military, government, or academia. However, countless opportunities for new entrants exist through mergers, acquisitions, and joint ventures under the guise of innovation, competition, and development.

The rapid and increasing pace of innovation in telecom has been referred to as one of the most disruptive forces on the planet. Advances in telecommunications technologies

and services have fundamentally transformed existing paradigms and continue to disrupt their own industry and adjacencies.

The societal importance of telecommunications is well accepted and broadly understood, reflected in its near-ubiquitous market penetration and the widespread use of related devices and tools (Lucky & Eisenberg, 2006). Telecommunications provides a technological foundation for communications across all facets of society. It is fully integrated into how people work, play, and live. Moreover, telecommunications enable participation and development around the world and plays a vital role in enabling participation for people and communities disadvantaged by geography.

Telecommunications also provides vital infrastructure for security, emergency response and disaster recovery.

As telecommunication products and services continue to proliferate, they represent a significant portion of the global economy. A 2015 report by Ernst & Young surveyed 40 telecommunications organizations around the globe and found that these companies' combined market capitalization was US\$991billion (Ernst & Young, 2015). Another study from Insight Research projected that telecommunications services revenue would grow to \$2.4 trillion by 2019. The sheer size and scope of the global telecommunications industry is difficult to fathom. Because of the telecommunications industry's scope and scale, this study primarily focused on the mobile/wireless category in the United States.

Industry trends. Telecom continues to innovate new solutions that disrupt the existing market as well as the surrounding sectors. Accordingly, mobile and wireless capabilities continue to expand. Deloitte's 2018 Telecommunications Industry outlook identified several trends in the mobile space:

1. Internet of Things: inclusive of new categories like the connected car, connected home, and wearables, the Internet of Things represents a significant growth opportunity for mobile operators, device manufacturers, and startups.
2. Fifth generation wireless network technology (5G): development and deployment of the latest network technology will enable faster throughputs as well as lower latencies which can benefit a variety of applications.
3. Convergence through mergers and acquisitions or partnerships within or across industries: Mobile content and video are some of the most significant and intensive uses for mobile networks. Carriers seeking revenue growth may seek new ventures in content, media, or other industries through partnerships or acquisitions. Additional convergence is likely as operators seek to capture a larger share of the available market.
4. Secondhand smartphone growth: the secondary (used) market for smartphones represent new revenue opportunities for operators, device companies, third-party resellers, and supply chain companies.
5. Augmented and Virtual Reality: noted as an emerging trend, although still in its early days as a mass-market technology. The intersection of these two technologies and telecommunications remains a white space within the industry, and new growth is yet to be discovered.
6. Digital transformation: the shift in primary services from traditional products (e.g., voice, SMS) to digital services (e.g., music, mobile TV, cloud services, Internet of Things) will continue (Valdez-de-Leon, 2016). This transformation of core offering requires telecommunication companies to build and deliver their offerings differently.
7. Net neutrality: Legislation was passed in the U.S. in 2017 reversing the federal net neutrality rules, effectively allowing companies greater control over how consumers access the internet. Numerous states have challenged this decision and the outcome remains uncertain. However, if net neutrality is fully repealed, telecommunications companies will have to develop new strategies related to growth, customer experience, and shareholder return.

Consumer behaviors also are expected to evolve. One Deloitte study estimates a four-fold increase in mobile data traffic between 2016 and 2021. To meet the increasing demand, massive investment is needed to build new and upgrade existing networks as well as to develop new product categories and technologies. The study suggests that an investment of \$130-\$150 billion is needed to create the broadband (fiber) network the

U.S. needs to meet the new demands for connectivity by 2023 (Deloitte Development LLC, 2017).

Industry leaders. Although hundreds of telecommunications companies are currently operating around the world, this study primarily focused on the U.S. mobile/wireless category. Table 1 provides reference information for a selection of major U.S. telecommunications companies. Adjusted earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization (EBITDA) is a non-GAAP industry measure used to describe relative profitability. It is often used as a comparator for companies within the sector and can also be used as a valuation metric. These companies compete and overlap in a variety of segments within the U.S. telecommunications industry. Table 2 depicts where and how these organizations compete in the market.

Table 1

Major U.S. Telecommunications Company Performance

Company	Total Subscribers (Millions)	Total Revenue (Millions \$)	Adjusted EBITDA (Millions \$)
AT&T	147.3	\$38,986	\$13,658
Century Link	4.9	\$5,900	\$2,270
Comcast	29.8	\$21,735	\$7,417
Dish Networks	12.997	\$3,460	\$745
Spectrum/Charter (Q1)	27.5	\$10,700	\$3,900
Sprint (Q1)	53.7	\$5,740	\$3,280
T-Mobile	75.6	\$10,600	\$3,200
Verizon	152.7	\$32,203	\$11,865

EBITDA: earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization

Table 2***Major U.S. Telecom Operator Overlap***

Company	Industry Segments					
	Wireless	Landline	ISP	Satellite	Infrastructure	TV/ Media
A&T	X	X	X	X	X	X
Century Link		X	X		X	X
Charter		X	X		X	X
Comcast	X	X	X		X	X
Dish Networks			X	X	X	X
Sprint	X	X			X	
T-Mobile	X					X
Verizon	X	X	X		X	X

Mergers and acquisitions (M&As) have been very common within the U.S. telecommunications industry, primarily led by companies searching for new revenue streams or alternative distribution channels, often by companies that operated primarily vertically and now want to expand their reach. To understand the competitive landscape, it is helpful to understand the legislation governing the industry. First, a review of U.S. Government's anti-trust lawsuit against AT&T resulted in the creation of the seven so-called Baby Bells in 1984. The industry remained heavily regulated until the Telecommunications Act of 1996; one of its features is that communications companies were invited to compete in any market against any other. While the legislation's primary goal was deregulation of the converging broadcasting and telecommunications markets, provisions within the Act allowed for the consolidation of companies within the industry.

Thus, almost frenetic M&A activity has characterized the industry since 1996. While there have been countless deals over the last 30 years, one of the most significant in recent time was AT&T's acquisition of Time Warner for \$85.4 billion at the close of

worldwide leader in communications, media & entertainment, and technology, AT&T is a modern media company that seeks to create the best entertainment and communications experiences in the world. With more than \$160 billion in revenue in 2017 (AT&T, 2018), AT&T is the largest communications company in the world by revenue. It has 249,000 employees worldwide and is ranked ninth on the Fortune 500 (Fortune, 2018).

Comcast. Comcast is a media and technology company with two primary businesses: Comcast Cable and NBC Universal. As a global telecommunications conglomerate, Comcast is the second-largest broadcasting and cable company in the world by revenue. It is the largest cable TV company and the largest home internet service provider in the United States. It is the third-largest home telephone service provider. Comcast owns and operates a variety of brands across the telecommunications and media industries: Xfinity cable, NBC, Telemundo, and Universal Pictures. Comcast has 139,000 employees worldwide. With annual revenue of nearly \$85 billion in 2017 (Comcast, 2018), Comcast is ranked 33 on the Fortune 500 (Fortune, 2018).

Dish Networks. Dish Network Corporation is a connectivity company. Its subsidiaries provide television entertainment to millions of customers through its satellite-based Dish TV and streaming Sling TV services. In addition to its TV services, Dish has commended buildout of a national narrowband Internet-of-Things network to provide new, innovative connectivity solutions. Dish Networks employed over 17,000 people in 2017. With annual revenue of over \$14 billion in 2017 (Dish Networks, 2018), Dish is ranked 203 on the Fortune 500 (Fortune, 2018).

T-Mobile. T-Mobile US, Inc. is a wireless company. With a workforce of over 51,000 domestic employees, it is the third-largest wireless operator in the United States providing wireless service to over 75 million customers under the T-Mobile and

MetroPCS brands. While publicly traded on the NASDAQ as TMUS, T-Mobile's primary shareholder is German telecommunications company, Deutsche Telekom. As America's Un-carrier, T-Mobile US, Inc., is redefining the way consumers and businesses buy wireless services through leading product and service innovation. T-Mobile's disruptive business strategy has earned significant customer and revenue growth along with significant awards and accolades within the telecommunications industry over the last five years. In 2017, the company generated \$40.6 billion in total revenue (T-Mobile, 2018).

Verizon. Verizon is a holding company whose subsidiaries provide communications as well as information and entertainment products and services to end consumers, businesses, and government agencies. The company provides telecommunications services through both wireless and wireline infrastructure and keeps millions of customers connected through its advanced infrastructure. Verizon also operates a number of internet, content, and media brands such as AOL and Yahoo under its subsidiary oath formed in 2017. It operated an unsuccessful online-TV company called Go90 from September 2015-July 2018. Verizon is one of the largest communications companies in the United States. It employed over 153,000 employees worldwide and earned \$126 billion in revenue in 2017 (Verizon Communications, 2018). It is ranked 16 on the Fortune 500 (Fortune, 2018).

Need for organizational agility in the U.S. telecommunications industry.

Telecom has changed radically in the past 10 years as data-hungry customers with smart devices consume ever more bandwidth. Over this period, operators expanded their service portfolios and overhauled their price plans to meet explosive demand, while increasing their capital expenditures to meet ongoing imperatives to upgrade network

capabilities (Ernst & Young, 2015). The pressures telecommunications companies face, given ongoing industry disruption and shifting competitive dynamics, underscore these companies' need for organizational agility.

Human Resources Function

In this study, the HR function refers to the internal department within an organization that creates and operates the formal systems devised to manage a company's employees, referred to as the organization's human resources or human capital. This section provides an overview of the HR function, discusses its importance to the broader organization, and considers the role that organizational agility plays within the HR function. Finally, approaches for cultivating organizational agility in the HR function are reviewed.

Overview of the human resources function. Traditional HR functions address seven essential objectives: staffing, development of workplace policies, compensation and benefits administration, retention, training and development, employment laws, and worker protection (Armstrong, 2006). HR strategy and services, an eighth function, is also discussed in a number of texts (Lawler, 2012; Schultz & van der Walt, 2015).

Each of these objectives manifests in different ways and at various points throughout the lifecycle of a company and an employee. Often these tasks need to be highly collaborative. For example, recruitment plays the critical role of bringing new talent into the organization. Although a key component of a job offer is the compensation package, the entire recruiting process is framed by compliance with labor law to ensure hiring is fair, equitable, and lawful. In this example, it is easy to understand how seemingly simple tasks are supported by complex underlying systems, structures, and processes.

As a field, HR management has undergone many changes over the last 20 years (Armstrong, 2006). In the past, HR or personnel departments handled a variety of administrative tasks to support managers in the organization, and these tasks aligned with the eight HR functions. In the modern era, many of the administrative and repetitive tasks associated with the employee lifecycle have been automated, sent offshore, or outsourced to a third-party—often for lower prices and higher quality than the company could manage itself (Hults, 2011). As responsibility for administrative and transactional tasks shift within HR, HR departments are transforming to be stronger business partners (Schultz & van der Walt, 2015) and strategists for the organization as a whole. Agile HR organizations, just like other functions, are better situated to respond and adapt to changes within their industry. The following quote from SHRM (2002) aptly reinforces this notion:

There is a real opportunity for HR to increase its role and visibility within line businesses, should HR professionals become better business people. To do so, it's not enough to bring HR functional skills to the table. There must be a foundation of business experience as well. The most successful HR professionals will be those who can quantify, in financial terms, their value to line organizations. When HR's primary organizational contribution is compliance focused and administratively based, HR is vulnerable. The best-positioned HR professionals are those who tap into an organization's longer-term strategies and develop an agenda based on meeting the company's future needs. (p. 12)

Importance of human resources to the broader organization. A changing workforce, global competition, advances in information technology, new knowledge, economic recession, demands for sustainable performance, and a host of other changes are forcing organizations to constantly examine and reevaluate how they operate (Lawler, 2012). HR departments, therefore, can play a strategic role to help the company evolve to meet these new demands. The HR organization, ultimately responsible to administer the

essential HR functions described in the previous section, finds itself at the intersection of these changes and are the people responsible to deliver results.

Competitive factors, such as cost, technology, distribution, manufacturing, and product features, only provide short term advantage in the market, and eventually are easily replicated. The only competitive weapon left is organization (Ulrich, 1998). The human resources within an organization and how they are structured and organized becomes the most competitive asset for a company, as illustrated by his assertion: “In the new economy, winning will spring from organizational capabilities, such as speed, responsiveness, agility, learning capacity, and employee competence” (p. 127).

HR teams, responsible for the design and structure of the organization, and the selection, training, and development of HR capabilities, therefore, become a critical part of any organization’s strategy. Ultimately an organization’s success rests on the people it employs to deliver the companies value proposition.

Organizational agility in human resources functions. For HR departments to maximize their value to the broader organization, they must develop both HR competence and strong business acumen. This represents a paradigm shift from traditional HR models and requires organizational agility to make the transition. An article from the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2012) discusses the criticality of the need for HR organizations to transform and develop their business acumen so that they can maximize the value of their services to the company.

A barrier to creating organizational agility in HR comes from a mistaken belief that electronic-HRM systems will magically help HR organizations transform into future-oriented, strategic partners (Bondarouk & Ruel, 2009). HR information systems, at their core, may help an HR organization improve underlying capabilities through process and

task efficiencies and automation. These applications and their core functionality provide the stable foundation of the agility pyramid, and may equip decision-makers with more insights, but in isolation do not create agility.

Creating organizational agility in human resources functions. Creating organizational agility within HR is no different than creating it within other functions; however, given the new role that HR teams are playing (Ulrich, 1998), developing organizational agility within HR is critical so that it can lead and train transformative capability throughout the broader organization.

Williams et al. (2013) warned that lacking agility has severe performance implications. They noted that organizations that lacked agility tend to perform, at best, slightly above or below their industry's average, depending upon the specific environmental forces at play, while others were chronic underperformers in their industries. Williams et al.'s research emphasized that it is critical for organizations to focus on developing and maturing behaviors and practices in each agility routine.

Although every transformational path is unique, initiatives to create organizational agility should begin with an assessment. The Center for Effective Organizations at the University of Southern California developed an assessment to assist organizations with this initial step in the process. The outcome of the organizational assessment, combined with business and organizational objectives, resources, and initiatives can be used to create an approach for change. *The Agility Factor* (Worley et al., 2014) outlined three broad categories of change: setting the strategy, fixing the foundation, and building the agility routines.

Setting the strategy includes both short- and long-term elements of intent and identity (Williams et al., 2013). Clearly defining the near-term needs and articulating a

path toward the new objective are critical steps to setting the strategy. Fixing the foundation is primarily focused on mastery of the so-called basics. These basics may connect to internal processes, management practices, systems and tools, or other aspects of the business. Those aspects of the foundation most strongly associated with the strategy for the organization should be fixed first (Williams et al., 2013). Only after these are addressed, the organization should focus on building agility routines. Developing the capabilities may require the creation of new processes, structures, or workflows that enable the behaviors desired of the individual, team, or organization.

Strategizing dynamically and perceiving environmental change are important routines of agility for HR organizations to develop as they relate to a number of HR's traditional responsibilities. An HR organization closely connected to the business strategy, and one that can accurately detect trends related to the workforce is an HR organization that can create real value for the company.

Summary

Organizational agility indicates a company's dexterity making the changes needed to sustain and enhance performance (Worley et al., 2014). Agile organizations are effective in that they can adapt to ongoing shifts in their environments. Agility is particularly critical in the telecommunications industry, given the shifts internal and external to most organizations in the industry. Moreover, HR is a central support function for an enterprise and works with all parts of a business to manage the human capital across the company. However, for the HR function to contribute to their organizations as effectively as possible, they need to cultivate mature routines of agility. This study examines the effort to enhance one agile routine (perceiving the environment) within the

HR function of one telecommunications company. The next chapter outlines the methods that were used to do so.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of agility and impacts of internal processes on the HR function of a telecom organization. Three research questions guided the design of this study:

1. How do members of the HR organization define the concept of agility and how do they rate the level of agility of the function?
2. How do members of the HR organization rate their organization's ability to perceive its environment?
3. To what extent do HR processes and practices contribute to the organization's agility?

This chapter describes the methods used in this study. Research design is described first, following by survey and interview procedures. Processes for analyzing the data and assuring human subjects protections are then discussed.

Research Design

This study used a mixed methods design. In these studies, quantitative and qualitative methods for gathering and analyzing data are used to generate a multifaceted, assessment of the topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Quantitative methods allow for statistical measurement of the study variables and ease of comparison across participants. A quantitative survey was developed to rapidly capture participants' perspectives on organizational agility within HR. Qualitative methods enable deep inquiry into the topic of study. Kvale (1996) stated that qualitative approaches allow researchers to capture the complexity and nuances of human experience in its most authentic form. Research interviewing, the qualitative approach used in this study, allows probing of participants' feelings, thoughts, and experiences in great depth.

Qualitative interviewing was considered appropriate for this study due to the complex nature of the topic of study. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that qualitative methods are helpful in exploratory studies where theory is lacking.

Mixed methods studies may be sequential, where one form of data is collected and analyzed and then the second form of data is collected and analyzed, or simultaneous, where qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analysis occurs only upon completion of data collection (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study used a simultaneous approach. Data for this study were collected using semi-structured one-on-one interviews and a quantitative survey. The potential drawbacks of mixed method approaches are that they can require extended timeframes for data collection and analysis. Furthermore, these studies require researchers to have a basic level of competency with both qualitative and quantitative research.

Survey Procedures

Survey data were gathered to evaluate the degree of agility present in the study organization's HR function (see Appendix A). Additional open-ended questions were posed to gather insights not captured in the closed-ended questions. Survey questions were organized into the following sections:

1. Degree of agility in the HR organization. Seven questions based on the literature review were posed to evaluate the HR function's degree of agility. For example, one question asks, "HR has a clear strategy." Answer choices range on a five-point Likert scale from "not at all" (1, indicating low agility) to "to a large extent" (5, indicating high agility). An additional question was posed later in the survey that asks respondents whether "HR has the organizational agility appropriate for demands of the business." This category of questions was asked to help answer Research Question 1.
2. Degree of organizational agility in respondent's role. Six questions based on the literature review were posed to evaluate the extent to which the respondent's role in the organization reflects agility. For example, one question asked, "I know how my work supports the HR vision." Answer

choices range on a five-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” (1, indicating low agility) to “strongly agree” (5, indicating high agility). This category of questions was asked to help answer Research Question 1.

3. HR function leadership style. Respondents were then asked to indicate the management style being used in the HR organization. Answer choices reflected the variety of leadership style classifications reflected in Northouse (2012) and Yukl (2012), such as Authoritarian, Participative, Delegative, Transformational, Transactional and Situational, and Other. Answer choices ranged on a five-point Likert scale from “Not at all” (1) to “To a large extent” (5). This question was asked to help answer Research Question 3.
4. Effectiveness of internal HR processes. Respondents were asked to indicate the effectiveness of 13 processes within the HR function, such as work prioritization within HR, budget management, and organizational "listening" (perceiving the environment). These activities are conducted by the HR Strategy & Planning team and are believed to influence the degree of agility in HR and the broader organization. Answer choices ranged on an 11-point Likert scale from “needs significant improvement” (0, indicating low agility) to “No improvement needed” (10, indicating high agility). These questions were asked to help answer Research Question 3.
5. Agility in perceiving the environment. Six questions based on the literature review were posed to evaluate the HR function’s degree of agility specific to perceiving the environment. For example, one question asked, “How attuned is the HR organization to the internal environment (within HR)?” Answer choices ranged on an 11-point Likert scale from “not at all” (0, indicating low agility) to “very” (10, indicating high agility). Respondents also could indicate that they did not know. Participants were asked for open-ended responses to explain their answers. This category of questions was asked to help answer Research Question 2.

Thirty leaders from across the HR function were randomly selected to receive an invitation to complete the online survey (see Appendix B). A follow-up email was sent one week later to remind participants to complete the survey. The survey was closed 2 days after the reminder email was sent.

Interview Procedures

Organization members were interviewed to gather in-depth data about the degree and nature of organizational agility present in the HR function. Participants were briefed at the start of the interview as follows:

One of the goals of the Strategy and Planning organization is to help the HR team improve how we listen to the broader organization, collect information, and then aggregate, interpret and synthesize it in an effort to better organize, communicate, and plan. The intent of this interview is to deepen the understanding of agility, specifically HR's ability to perceive the environment (internal and external), adapt and take appropriate action.

A 10-question script was used to guide the conversation (see Appendix C). Four topics were discussed:

1. Organizational agility. Participants were asked to describe what organizational agility is, how agile the overall HR organization is, and why organizational agility is important for HR. This category of questions was asked to help answer Research Question 1.
2. HR perceiving function. Participants were asked to gauge and describe the HR organization's level of attunement to its environment. Three additional probing questions were asked to ascertain the nature and extent of HR's perceiving the environment abilities and to solicit participants' suggestions for improving that aspect. These questions were asked to help answer Research Question 2.
3. Strategy and Planning effort. Participants were asked to describe the nature and agility-related impact of the Strategy and Planning team's implementation of a new information collection, planning, and communications approach. This team's efforts concern activities, such as work prioritization within HR, budget management, and organizational "listening" (perceiving the environment), which reflect the effectiveness of internal HR processes and are believed to influence the degree of agility in HR and the broader organization. These questions were asked to help answer Research Question 3.

A final catch-all question was asked to gather any additional insights participants had about organizational agility.

Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes. All 30 members of the study organization received an email requesting them to schedule an interview (see Appendix D). Interviews were conducted by telephone or in person, depending upon the availability of the participant.

Data Analysis Procedures

Frequency distributions, means, and standard deviations were calculated for each closed-ended question on the survey. Answers to open-ended survey and interview questions were aggregated and reviewed to identify common themes across the participants.

Human Subjects Protections

All safeguards required by the board were implemented to protect participants. Confidentiality and consent procedures are important to protect participants from physical or psychological harm (including loss of dignity, autonomy, and self-esteem), protect their privacy and confidentiality, and protect against unjustifiable deception.

Study participation was voluntary. Participants received an informed consent statement (Appendix E) to participate in the research. They were able to drop out at any time without penalty. In this study, all participants worked at the same company and the study data consisted of feedback on processes they were already participating in as a part of standard operating procedures. Participant demographics were not gathered on the survey or during the interview to shield their identities and maintain their confidentiality. The project observed all human subjects protection regulations.

Chapter 4

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of agility and impacts of internal processes on the HR function of a telecom organization. Three research questions guided the design of this study:

1. How do members of the HR organization define the concept of agility and how do they rate the level of agility of the function?
2. How do members of the HR organization rate their organization's ability to perceive its environment?
3. To what extent do HR processes and practices contribute to the organization's agility?

This chapter describes the results of the study. A profile of the sample is presented first. Findings are then organized by research question.

Sample

Fourteen respondents from the study organization completed the survey and 13 completed an interview. Due to the anonymity of survey completion, it was not possible to determine whether the interviewees had also completed a survey. The majority of each sample were in senior leadership: 21% of survey respondents and 23% of interview participants were vice president roles or higher, and 50% of survey respondents and 54% of interview participants were in director or senior director positions (see Table 3).

Table 3

Study Sample

Position	Survey Sample <i>N</i> = 14		Interview Sample <i>N</i> = 13	
	n	%	n	%
Vice president or above	3	21%	3	23%
Director/Senior director	7	50%	7	54%
Manager/Senior manager	4	29%	3	23%

Organizational Agility in the Human Resources Organization

Definition of agility. Ten participants explained that agility means being responsive to external forces (see Table 4). One participant stated:

Agility is the ability of any organization to meet organizational objectives given the internal and external pressure that exists in a system. External and internal views are critical so that leaders can create alignment and move forward in a common direction.

Eight participants described agility as being nimble, as indicated in these responses: “We have developed a process to react more quickly by understanding a business need and quickly developing solutions to new problems” and “the ability for a function/team to be able to move, execute, and adapt.” Five participants described agility as adopting a future-oriented mindset and anticipating what is needed. One participant elaborated:

Agility means the ability to forecast broader changes in the world. To get ahead of the changes that need to be made. HR needs to be ahead of these changes. ... It means a point-of-view that enables us to think strategically about how people will be more effective in the future.

Table 4

Participants’ Definitions of Organizational Agility

Definition	n
Responsive to external forces	10
Ability to be nimble	8
Adopt a future-oriented mindset and anticipating what is needed	5
Continuous improvement	3

N = 13

Importance of organizational agility. Although 6 of the 12 participants were not asked about the importance of agility due to time constraints, six of the seven participants who were asked indicated that agility is necessary for survival and success (see Table 5).

One stated, “Agility is even more important for HR, so that we can survive and be hyper-effective as the business changes.” Another shared, “HR must be as agile or more so than the company to have complete alignment and success.”

Three participants stated HR must be agile to stay attuned to people needs. One explained:

Organizational agility is important for HR so that HR can steward and support the people who work here. The company is successful not because of the technology, products or pricing, we are successful because of our people and how they serve and support customers. HR needs to be quick, intuitive, and dialed in to the needs of the employees so they can continue to deliver on the customer promise. The HR function becomes even more important as the business grows and expands. HR can help create harmony – the people aspects of companies will be even more important as we advance digitally. HR needs to be agile to support these changes with technology and ensure that the workforce is equipped to work in the new, more modern era.

Table 5

Importance of Organizational Agility for Human Resource Function

Importance	n
Necessary for survival and success	6
Human resources must be agile to stay attuned to people needs	3
No response	6

N = 13

Level of agility in human resources. Two participants rated HR as being highly agile and seven rated HR as being moderately agile (see Table 6). One shared, “We are more agile than HR I’ve ever observed in any organization that I’ve worked, but we still have opportunities. We are willing to experiment and evolve.” Another countered, “We have challenges being agile. Our responses to the needs of the business are slow and a little bit clunky.” Five participants noted that agility continues to evolve. While one respondent noted, “We are evolving here, but there is still room to grow,” Another stated, “We are much more agile [than we’ve ever been] with embedded business teams.”

Table 6***Level of Agility in Human Resources Function***

Agility	n
Highly agile	2
Moderately agile	7
Minimally agile	3
Agility continues to evolve	5

$N = 13$

Overall, survey respondents rated the HR function as having some agility ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 1.26$; see Table 7). The strongest indicator of agility in the HR organization, according to respondents, was that HR has a clear vision (71% or 10 participants rated this item as 4 or 5). The majority rated the HR function as only somewhat being a learning organization (86% or 12 participants rated this item as a 2 or 3).

Table 7***Agility in Human Resources Organization***

Agility in Human Resources	Not at all (1)		Somewhat (2-3)		Substantially (4-5)		Mean	SD
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
HR has a clear vision	1	7%	3	21%	10	71%	3.79	1.15
HR has a clear strategy	2	14%	8	57%	4	29%	3.00	1.20
The HR strategy is appropriately aligned with the overall company objectives	1	7%	7	50%	6	43%	3.29	1.10
HR assesses the business landscape and adapts well to external forces	0	0%	11	79%	3	21%	3.07	0.96
HR has a long-term strategy	2	14%	10	71%	2	14%	2.43	0.90
HR has internal structure or process to help information flow easily	3	21%	10	71%	1	7%	2.21	0.86
HR is a "learning organization"	0	0%	12	86%	2	14%	2.71	0.70
Overall		9%		62%		29%	2.79	1.26

$N = 14$; Scale: 1 = Not at all, 2-3 = Somewhat, 5 = Substantially; HR = human resources

Respondents also agreed their roles featured agility ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.09$; see Table 8). In particular, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they know how their work contributes to the success of the company and that they regularly collaborate with

others within HR. In contrast, half the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that roles and responsibilities are clear throughout the organization. Additionally, half the respondents were neutral about whether they usually have all the information they need to make well-informed decisions.

Table 8

Agility in Participants' Roles

Agility in Individuals	Disagree (1-2)		Neutral (3)		Agree (4-5)		Mean	SD
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
I know how my work supports the HR vision	1	7%	0	0%	13	93%	4.36	0.81
I know how my work contributes to the success of the company	0	0%	0	0%	14	100%	4.50	0.50
I regularly collaborate with others within HR	0	0%	0	0%	14	100%	4.43	0.49
Management practices help me feel connected, knowledgeable and equipped to do my job	4	29%	6	43%	4	29%	3.00	0.76
The majority of the time, I have all the information I need to make well-informed decisions	3	21%	7	50%	4	29%	3.00	1.07
Roles and responsibilities are clear throughout the organization	7	50%	5	36%	2	14%	2.64	0.72
Overall		18%		21%		61%	3.65	1.09

N = 14; Scale: 1-2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4-5 = Agree; HR = human resources

Survey respondents were then asked whether HR has the organizational agility appropriate for the demands of the business. Nearly half (43% or 6 respondents) reported a neutral response, whereas 36% (*n* = 5) disagreed HR was sufficiently agile. Only 21% (*n* = 3) agreed HR was appropriately agile for business demands. Their open-ended responses explained that HR is becoming quicker and more agile than it was in the past, including “We’re able to turn on a dime and deliver what the business needs...,” and “...we’ve become more agile and the way we deliver is different...” Another idea concerned the need to communicate more often and more effectively to provide context for HR employees about why things are changing, such as, “Lack of context kills us in

HR constantly, especially as we try to move faster.” The last notion that emerged was related to HR’s ability to prioritize work effectively, with one respondent stating, “We are not as effective at deprioritizing work to achieve it especially [for] shorter-term deliverables.”

Factors affecting agility. Although interviewees were not asked to identify the factors that affect agility, five participants offered such insights when defining agility (see Table 9). Two participants identified individual capacity, as exemplified in, “There are a lot of sharp people who have experienced agile work shifts.” Two participants described tools, programs, processes and frameworks. One shared, “If HR wants to be an agile organization, then it needs to start acting like an agile organization. We’ve had some good efforts in this area; [Program 1], [Program 2] are good examples.”

Table 9

Factors that Foster Agility

Factor	n
Tools, programs, processes, and frameworks	2
Individual capacity for agility	2
Organizational structure	1

N = 13; Although participants were not asked this question directly, five provided data indicating the factors of agility

Barriers to agility. Eleven participants noted that resources, tools, knowledge, and skills posed barriers to agility, such as “We don’t always have the right mix of people, or we involve too many and nobody has accountability. Or, other times we don’t include folks with the right experience,” and “This [creating organizational agility] will require additional investment in both people, programs, and structures. We could be so much better if there were more resources” (see Table 10).

Table 10

Biggest Barrier to Improving Agility

Barrier	n
Resources, tools, knowledge, and skills	11
Lack of strategic planning & thinking	10
Collective mindset and traditions	8
Ineffective communications practices	6
Lack of role clarity and decision-rights structure	3
Organization structure	2
Misaligned performance framework and rewards system	2
Leadership skills	2

N = 13

Ten participants noted lack of strategic planning and thinking, such as: “we solve issues too myopically. Need more strategic thinking and planning so that the function has a raised level of awareness, maturity and acumen to be successful,” and “Need more collective planning within HR. There is a lack of planning and structure. We tend to be ‘waiting around’ for the next big thing. We need more conversations about agility and organizational planning.” Eight participants noted collective mindset and traditions, as exemplified in:

HR employees are still stuck in what they do and it is hard for employees to embrace ideas of disruption. Some teams and leaders are doing this, but there is a legacy cultural issue. Polarity between HR and ‘Disruptor’ – why does this have to be binary?

Another participant explained, “Culture and tenure at [Company] prevent agility.” Six participants noted ineffective communications practices, as indicated in “The place that we need to solve for now is the flow of information from Crews back to Headquarters teams.” Another shared:

We tend to have a hard time getting the right people together to meet without spin. It is hard to get things from ideation to execution. This process can be heavy weight, and hard to get started than it should be. When presented a need for cross-functional coordination across groups

within HR, it takes a while to start. We don't have a framework for teams to effectively communicate and plan together.

Ability to Perceiving the Environment

Survey respondents indicated that HR exhibited some agility in perceiving the environment ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 2.31$; see Table 11). Eleven respondents (79%) indicated that environmental inputs influence HR strategy and work within the organization to some extent, and two (14%) those inputs very much influenced work. When asked about attenuation to the internal (within HR) environment, respondents' average score was 5.93, which is lower than the average score for attenuation to the broader business ($M = 6.21$), the HR industry ($M = 6.29$), or to the Telecommunications industry ($M = 6.21$).

Table 11

Perceiving the Environment

Perception	Little (0-2)		Somewhat (3-7)		Very much (8-10)		Mean	SD
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
How attuned is the HR organization to the internal environment (within HR)?	2	14%	9	64%	3	21%	5.93	2.37
How attuned is the HR organization to the external environment (broader business)?	2	14%	8	57%	4	29%	6.21	2.37
How attuned is the HR organization to industry trends?	3	21%	6	43%	5	36%	6.29	2.63
How attuned is the HR organization to (telecommunication) industry trends/news?	3	21%	8	57%	3	21%	6.21	2.23
How effectively does HR process or interpret environmental inputs?	1	7%	11	79%	2	14%	6.14	2.07
How much do environmental inputs influence HR strategy or work within the organization?	1	7%	11	79%	2	14%	6.29	2.05
Overall		14%		63%		23%	5.18	2.31

$N = 14$; Scale: 0-2 = Little, 3-7 = Somewhat, 8-10 = Very much; HR = human resources

Four interviewees asserted that the HR organization is highly attuned, while seven stated that attunement varied based on the focus (see Table 12). Participant comments included, "Internally, we are tuned well to the speed of the organization," "HR has strong organizational perception. We are really good at understanding what's happening in the business," and "Some parts of HR are more tuned in here. Crews are more tuned into the

needs of the business, but it doesn't translate into intel that benefits the broader HR. Similar dynamic within the HR leadership team.” Participants reporting low HR attunement stated, ““Mid-level management and individual contributor roles aren’t broadly aware or attuned to the HR industry or best practices,” and:

HR is really poorly attuned to the environment. Not just in HR, but other organizations within [Company]. The telecom industry is arrogant in that we’ve had a history of success and that we are so large. As a result of the historical position we’re in, we don’t pay attention... General regulation of the telecom industry allows the industry to be slow and non-disruptive and therefore non-agile.

Table 12

Level of Human Resources’ Ability to Perceive the Environment

Attunement	n
Highly attuned	4
Variably attuned	7
Minimally attuned	1
No response	1

N = 13

Eleven participants rated the organization as doing well, particularly with regard to effectively managing projects (n = 6; see Table 13). A participant shared, “We do a great job ‘turning on the gas’ for key inputs or demands from leaders. [Project 1] and [Project 2] were delivered and had great impact.” Another participant explained:

[The] team did a good job challenging the status quo for go-to-market activities and tweaked the approach to go faster. A good example of agility. Also noticing this execution behavior more and more for projects and initiatives. Retrospectives here have helped the function streamline the process.

Five participants noted that HR responds appropriately to issues that are clearly HR related, as exemplified in, “Except for changes in laws and regulations, we see the writing on the wall and do this well. We don’t react, we think strategically here.” Another participant said, “When the inputs are directly related to HR or [Company], we do a good

job processing and taking action. For example, HR did a good job with #MeToo movement.”

Of the eight participants who outlined suggestions for improvement, four noted the need to think more deeply, globally, and strategically related to issues not specifically HR related. One respondent mentioned:

Sometimes we process quickly and perhaps not as deeply as we could. There's an opportunity for the function to do more/better. We over index on the need to be responsive, which can cause us to misunderstand the complete picture or to develop solutions in a silo. Sometimes our understanding is surface-level. There are individuals who clearly understand the businesses they support, but across HR, our operational knowledge is lacking.

Another participant explained:

...failed to take action after the shooting in New Zealand in March, there was no note or communication to employees about how the company stands with its Muslim employees. The world is shifting around us and [Company] and HR are not attuned all the time.

Another four participants noted that HR tends to be too reactive. One participant mentioned:

Harder for HR to transition to sustainment of the initiative. HR is not unique in this—as the company has the same issues with product launch/management.... Opportunity for HR to be more proactive here vs. reacting to leadership asks. HR has a history of short-term reactions that produce good outcomes, but they're not sustainable.

Another participant explained, “HR consumes environmental inputs, but there is opportunity to improve. We do well when we react, but sometimes these are surprises. In some cases, we seek these inputs proactively, but we do more reaction in this space.”

Three participants noted the need for more effective tools and frameworks for processing and understanding information received, as demonstrated in:

We are the victims of being really busy. Sometimes we get information, but it doesn't click well. Takes time for people to understand the impact of

new information. ...May not initially understand the input, even if it impacts the larger HR function

Table 13

Effectiveness of Human Resources Function

Effectiveness	n
Doing Well	
Effectively managing projects	6
Responding appropriately to issues that are clearly HR related	5
Areas for Improvement	
Need to think more deeply, globally, and strategically related to issues not specifically HR-related	4
HR tends to be too reactive	4
Need more effective tools and frameworks for processing and understanding information received	3
Need more effective tools and frameworks for communicating information	2
Need more agility and improved management for projects	2

N = 13; HR = human resources

Factors that enhance ability to perceive the environment. Four participants asserted that HR taking part in industry groups and benchmarking would enhance its capability to attune to its environment (see Table 14). One participant shared, “We stay very informed externally through partnerships with professional groups.” Another mentioned:

We do a lot of benchmarking and sharing with companies in Puget sound and beyond. There is a lot of knowledge sharing. There are legislative impacts to my team. We are well connected to legal who help us stay 'tuned' to legislative and regulatory changes. Vendors and news feeds help us stay abreast of 'things coming' so that we can plan how to adapt.

Table 14

Factors that Enhance Ability to Perceive the Environment

Factor	n
Participation in industry groups and benchmarking	4
Technology and software development practices	1
Organizational structure	1
Relationships and networking	1

N = 13

Meanwhile, seven participants asserted that organizational structures impede the perceiving routine of agility (see Table 15). One participant shared, “There are a number of things that could be streamlined or simplified structurally (organization and process), to help HR be more successful... Lots of silos exist (work, communication etc.), which prevent leaders and teams from being connected.”

Table 15

Biggest Barrier to Improving Ability to Perceive the Environment

Barrier	n
Organizational structures impede perceiving routine of agility	7
Lack of connection and alignment with business strategy	4
Poor communication contributes to low organizational perception	5
Low levels of trust and credibility result in limitations	4
Company culture may be a barrier to the perceiving routine	2
Insufficient knowledge or tools limits organizational perception	3

N = 13

Five interviewees noted that poor communication undermines organizational perception, such as:

When my teams need to talk to the business, there are many layers to work through. Biggest fear is that someone will tell my back-office team that they can't go to the business when they need to. I always feel like I'm at the brink of that. This might be history speaking. In the past, there was a legacy practice that prevented the back office teams from getting business insight. Regarding Perceiving routines, while I haven't been in a crew role, there needs to be more comfort with business office teams connecting with the field without working through Crews or other bureaucratic processes to get connected. It feels like there is a strong desire to know when a client is being asked for information/insights.

Another four participants noted that lack of connection and alignment with business strategy pose barriers to attunement, as explained in:

The business does a good job looking at the market from a product space. HR is not tied into the overall strategic view or plan for the organization.

We are successful without this, but we could be so much more powerful if we were connected in better/stronger at the top.

Suggestions to enhance perceiving routine of agility. Several themes emerged regarding suggestions for enhancing environmental perception (see Table 16). Four participants mentioned improving execution processes. A participant shared, “HR should adopt a business mentality related to execution focused roles. HR needs to figure out how to switch from high to low level.” Another participant explained, “For programs and back-office teams, doing more retrospectives quickly could be helpful, and figure out how to incorporate feedback into future work. Need to be able to execute on feedback earlier.” Three mentioned improving communication and information flow. One participant mentioned, “Need more connection and space to communicate and get together. Mixers or networking to focus on relationship building. Relationship building can help create new communication paths. Need to accelerate.” Another participant explained:

Ultimately, as an HR organization, we could truly be the most agile if there was a better free-flow of information across the organization... HR could benefit from [an] improved communications framework so that we can work as one team to solve problems.

Table 16

Suggestions to Enhance Perceiving the Environment and Agility

Suggestion	n
Improve execution process	4
Improve communication and information flow	3
Be included in conversation with business partners	2
Increase business acumen	1
Change the mindset	1
No response	5

N = 13

Contribution of Human Resources Processes and Practices to Organizational Agility

Survey respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which various leadership styles were exhibited by top leadership in the HR organization (see Table 17). The most frequently endorsed styles were transactional leadership (57% [eight participants] reported this being exhibited to a moderate or large extent, $M = 3.79$, $SD = 0.94$) and authoritarian leadership (57% [eight participants] reported this being exhibited to a moderate or large extent, $M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.18$). The majority of participants indicated that participative leadership was exhibited somewhat (79% [11 participants] reported it being exhibited a little or to some extent, $M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.88$). Two survey respondents provided comments, with one describing HR leadership as being “reactive” and the other explaining there is “a strong attempt to be collaborative and consensus, but not democratic.”

Table 17

Leadership Style within Human Resources

Leadership Style	Not at all (1)		Somewhat (2-3)		Substantially (4-5)		Mean	SD
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
Authoritarian Leadership (Autocratic)	2	14%	4	29%	8	57%	3.43	1.18
Participative Leadership (Democratic)	0	0%	11	79%	3	21%	2.93	0.88
Delegative Leadership (Laissez-Faire)	3	21%	7	50%	4	29%	2.64	1.11
Transformational Leadership	4	29%	9	64%	1	7%	2.14	0.91
Transactional Leadership	0	0%	6	43%	8	57%	3.79	0.94
Situational Leadership	1	7%	9	64%	4	29%	2.79	0.94

$N = 14$; Scale: 1 = Not at all, 2-3 = Somewhat, 4-5 = Substantially

Overall, 70% of participants responded that internal processes need some improvement ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 2.58$; see Table 18). The processes needing significant improvement were organizational ‘listening’ (57%, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 2.77$) and systems

and tools (50%, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 2.69$). Three respondents (23%) indicated that project management within HR needed minimal improvement; however, the processes with the highest average scores were ‘pull’ communications ($M = 7.07$, $SD = 1.79$), program management ($M = 6.71$, $SD = 1.67$), ‘push’ communications ($M = 6.43$, $SD = 2.06$), and prioritization of CAPEX Initiatives ($M = 6.43$, $SD = 1.45$).

Table 18

Effectiveness of Internal Processes

Internal Process	Improvement Needed						Mean	SD
	Significant (0-2)		Some (3-7)		Minimal (8-10)			
	#	%	#	%	#	%		
Overall work prioritization within HR	1	7%	13	93%	0	0%	5.14	1.46
Prioritization of CAPEX initiatives	0	0%	13	93%	1	7%	6.43	1.45
Prioritization of OPEX initiatives	3	21%	11	79%	0	0%	5.00	1.46
Visibility to initiatives and resource allocation	5	36%	9	64%	0	0%	5.00	2.04
Budget management within HR	1	7%	11	79%	2	14%	5.93	1.94
Overall internal communication within HR	3	21%	10	71%	1	7%	5.57	1.95
'Push' (email)	2	14%	10	71%	2	14%	6.43	2.06
'Pull' (HR Today, Intranet Portal)	1	7%	11	79%	2	14%	7.07	1.79
Management cascade (Manage & Lead, Team meetings)	4	29%	10	71%	0	0%	5.36	1.91
Systems and tools (Team, SharePoint, Slack etc.)	7	50%	6	43%	1	7%	4.64	2.69
Program management within HR (evergreen work)	0	0%	12	86%	2	14%	6.71	1.67
Project management within HR (fixed cycle work)	2	15%	8	62%	3	23%	5.85	2.66
Organizational 'listening' (attenuation to the business/environment around HR)	8	57%	3	21%	3	21%	4.64	2.77
Overall		20%		70%		9%	5.44	2.58

$N = 14$; Scale: 0-2 = Needs significant improvement, 3-7 = Some improvement needed, 8-10 = Minimal improvement needed; HR = human resources

Ten of the 13 interview participants reported they were aware of the Strategy and Planning Effort. Six participants asserted that operational processes enhance effectiveness and agility (see Table 19). One participant shared:

The operational processes are having an impact on organizational agility.” A third participant explained, “These [processes] are effective for planning and deliver. Would like to partner to make these even more effective. Have seen a lot of things come out of the team that are really helpful to ensure organizational change management... yes, these processes are having a positive impact on the agility of the function.

Yet, five participants noted a lack of clarity about details, purpose, or impact affecting the project:

there is more transparency—with processes come more information sharing. The more info we have, the better/quicker decision-making we can do together as an organization. Are we becoming faster? Not sure. Are we better than before—not sure? There is more communication between the teams than there was a year ago when I joined.

Five participants noted that despite better processes and frameworks for communication, more needs to improve:

It feels like there are information access issues and it is hard to keep track of how to engage in the process. Because it is difficult to engage, I have a workaround process with a direct point of contact. It feels like an extra task and it seems hard to work through the processes. I think that prevents people from taking action. While these processes may help the HR leadership team, the information is not cascading down to other leaders. It feels like the processes within HR support a top-down leadership model. To be truly agile, decision making needs to be pushed lower in the organization. This will also help people realize their full potential.

Four participants noted that a lack of or unknown impact on agility highlighted a sense of ambiguity related to operational process. One participant said, “It’s too soon to know if these processes are having an impact on functional agility.”

Table 19

Impressions of the Strategy and Planning Effort

Impression	n
Operational processes enhance effectiveness and agility	6
Unclear on details, purpose, or impact	5
Better processes and frameworks for communication	5
Lack of impact or unknown impact on agility	4
No response	2

$N = 13$

Summary

Several findings are noteworthy related to Research Question 1. First, participants believe agility consists of four factors: responsiveness, nimbleness, future-oriented, and

ever-changing work. Second, participants believed agility was important for HR because it can help the function stay attuned to the needs of the people and organizations they support. They also considered agility important for success. Third, survey and interview participants rated the HR function as having moderate agility and the majority of respondents indicated HR had a clear vision. Participants additionally expressed that the HR organization is a learning organization. Fourth, respondents agreed that they knew how their work supports the HR vision and its work overall. Notably, half the survey respondents indicated that roles and responsibilities were unclear. Half the survey respondents indicated they did not have the right information to perform their jobs. This sentiment was echoed by interview participants, who stated that lack of communication flows and frameworks undermine agility. Finally, participants noted several barriers to agility, including lack of resources, tools, knowledge, and skills; lack of strategic planning and thinking; and unhelpful collective mindset and traditions.

Regarding Research Question 2, participants indicated that HR's agility in perceiving the environment was highly variable. According to participants, HR is more attuned to HR industry trends than to the internal company, the internal HR environment, or the telecommunications industry. They advised participation in industry groups and benchmarking as a means to improving perception. The core improvements needed concerned slowing down, processing information more effectively, and taking more deliberate action regarding the inputs received. Participants further believed that organizational structures, tools and processes, and culture all can impede the organization's ability to perceive the environment. Numerous suggestions focused on improving communication and execution processes and driving more inclusivity in communication.

Relevant to Research Question 3, respondents concurred that HR leadership is predominantly authoritarian and transactional, with little endorsement of transformational styles. According to participants, the majority of HR processes need significant improvement—particularly HR systems and tools as well as processes for organizational listening. Most participants in this study expressed they were aware of work being done to improve internal processes and perceptiveness in the organization, although there remained a lack of clarity about how these processes affected agility. The next chapter provides conclusions and discussion of these results.

Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of agility and impacts of internal processes on the HR function of a telecom organization. Three research questions guided the design of this study:

1. How do members of the HR organization define the concept of agility and how do they rate the level of agility of the function?
2. How do members of the HR organization rate their organization's ability to perceive its environment?
3. To what extent do HR processes and practices contribute to the organization's agility?

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings. The following sections present a summary of the key findings, Conclusions, recommendations for managers, similar organizations, and organization development practitioners. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research also are outlined.

Key Findings Summary

Organizational agility in the human resources organization. A comparison of participants' responses to the literature review suggests they have a reasonable understanding of agility, as they indicated it consists of four factors: responsiveness, nimbleness, future-orientation, and ever-changing work. This definition is roughly consistent with definitions of agility centering on flexibility and adaptability outlined by past authors (Falance, 2012; Holsapple & Li, 2008). Moreover, participants agreed that agility was important, both for HR's general success and because it helps HR stay attuned to the needs of the people and organizations they support. These views are consistent

with past authors, who argued that agility is a critical antecedent of performance (Felipe et al., 2017; Sambamurthy et al., 2003; Worley et al., 2014).

Based on participants' assessments of their own roles and their organization, it appears that the HR function has moderate agility and much room for improvement, specific to clarifying roles and responsibilities; leveraging improving resources, tools, knowledge, and skills (especially those concerning communication); improving the level of strategic planning and thinking; and shifting mindsets and traditions that favor bureaucracy. Williams et al. (2013) similarly emphasized the importance of evaluating and adapting the organization's foundation and structure to enhance agility.

Ability to perceive the environment. Study findings indicated that the HR organization exhibited some agility in perceiving the environment. Moreover, participants described HR's level of attunement is variable, with higher attunement to HR industry trends and lesser attunement to the internal company, the internal HR environment, and the telecommunications industry. Participants believed that participating in industry groups; benchmarking; and enacting a slower, more deliberate process of gathering, interpreting, and acting on the inputs received would enhance attunement. They offered several suggestions to that end, including improving communication and execution processes and driving more inclusivity in communication.

These results could be expected, given SHRM's (2002) note that developing both the HR competence and strong business acumen necessary for agility and perceiving the environment is often a paradigm shift for these departments. Recommendations from participants echoed Williams et al.'s (2013) advice that greater agility and perceptiveness is found in fixing the foundation and mastering the basics of internal processes, management practices, systems, and tools. Williams et al. added that strategizing

dynamically and perceiving environmental change are perhaps the most important routines of agility for HR teams to develop as they relate to several of HR's core responsibilities, as it aids the HR organization in accurately detecting trends and creating real value for the company.

Contribution of human resources processes and practices to organizational agility. Study findings indicated that several aspects of the HR organization are acting to depress agility, including the leadership style and various HR processes. In particular, respondents described HR leadership as being authoritarian and transactional. This command-and-control leadership style may pose challenges for achieving agility within the organization. Moreover, many HR processes need significant improvement, such as those concerning communication and organizational listening. These findings were echoed throughout this study. Although participants were aware of efforts in the organization to improve internal processes, they voiced uncertainty about how these activities affected agility.

These findings concerning the need to improve leadership, structure, processes, and culture again reflect Williams et al.'s (2013) exhortations to fix the foundation of the organization if agility is to improve. Furthermore, it is important to heed warnings from Bondarouk and Ruel (2009) that electronic systems cannot magically fix these issues. Instead, carefully architecting governance, decision-making systems, and language in the department may be helpful for supporting HR agility in everyday work (Aghina et al., 2015).

Conclusions

1. The dominance of transactional management style is interfering with the organization's ability to increase its agility. Management focus on established routines and procedures, coupled with a highly tuned responsive/reactive

approach to initiatives, projects, and issues create an environment whereby agility is difficult to cultivate.

2. Improved organizational planning and strategy are needed to establish a vision and accompanying guidelines for agility. Short-term thinking and reactive management limit the function's agility and limit its ability to support the long-term human capital needs of the company.
3. Insufficient levels of dialogue and inadequate communication frameworks are hampering agility. This was evident for both internal communication within the HR organization and for communication between HR and other organizations within the company.
4. Organizational culture may be resulting in deep-seated resistance to agility throughout the levels of the organization.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the HR organization include:

1. Focus efforts on improving HR's ability to think and operate strategically. The study data suggested that inability to think and operate strategically was a challenge for the current organization—one that prevents the organization from operating with agility. Therefore, the organization should focus on improving HR's ability to think and operate strategically. This may be achieved by increasing focus on organizational planning, creating focused time for leaders within the organization to focus energy on the strategy and direction of the function, or through enabling rich dialogue at multiple levels throughout the organization about the strategic direction of the function and the work underway. It also may benefit the organization to communicate its strategic intentions broadly both within and outside of the organization to set new precedent and create a "rally point" to aid change management efforts.
2. Invest time, energy, and resources on improving communication tools, frameworks, and methods. Research suggested there are opportunities to improve communication within the HR function. As a result, the organization should invest time, energy, and resources on improving communication tools, frameworks, and methods. This may be achieved through development of a communications framework designed to address key pain points within the current process. Additionally, simplification of communication tools and technologies could reduce confusion and frustration that is evident within HR. As the communication framework and supporting technology platforms are adjusted, it will be especially important for the HR organization to communicate why changes are being implemented.
3. Invest in improving the organizational tools, processes, and strategic frameworks to enhance HR's ability to adequately perceive and interpret inputs from within the company, the internal HR environment, and the

telecommunications industry. The study data suggested that insufficient organizational tools, processes and strategic frameworks impact the HR function's ability to perceive and interpret input from within the organization and the broader telecommunications industry. Therefore, HR should invest in improving the organizational tools, processes, and strategic frameworks to enhance HR's ability to adequately perceive and interpret inputs from within the company, the internal HR environment and the telecommunications industry. This may be achieved through the creation of so-called information exchange forums, development of cross-functional learning opportunities, and the support of networking and relationship development programs or initiatives.

4. Integrate continuous improvement concepts and buy-in strategies into operations to raise organization's level of agility. Research suggested that operational processes are having a moderate impact on organizational agility. Increasing the level of agility within the organization may be achieved through instilling process improvement methodologies and change management training. Additionally, it is important for employees to understand why operational processes are adjusted through these efforts; therefore, robust communications and training should accompany modification of operational processes within HR. Benchmarking and sharing best practices with other HR organizations may also yield additional insights related to the ongoing improvement of internal operational processes.

Recommendations for organization development (OD) practitioners working with

HR organizations regarding their agility include:

1. Further investigate the leadership, cultural, and operational issues preventing the HR organization from being agile and design appropriate interventions. The study data suggested there are multiple issues that prevent HR from being agile within an organization. Diagnosing obstacles to agility and designing appropriate interventions may be achieved through focused, cyclical, action-research efforts designed to further study these issues, implement remedies, study the outcomes, and incorporate feedback. This process can be repeated over time to drive continuous improvement in these areas.
2. Partner with the organization to design interventions that improve HR's capabilities and structures for connecting with and listening to its business stakeholders. Data from this research suggested that HR was disconnected from the business. Interventions to improve HR's capabilities and structures may be achieved through myriad methods, including one-on-one coaching, cross-functional team dynamics activities, and large-group interventions designed to help HR professionals and managers work more effectively with business stakeholders.
3. Introduce and leverage change management practices to support the success of projects and initiatives. The study data showed that some individuals and

teams resist change and new ways of working. More effective change management practices may include the development of a strategic change framework through which all projects and initiatives are aligned. OD practitioners should also focus on change management education and training, and work with organizational leaders to align measurements, metrics, and rewards around shifting organizational behaviors related to change.

Limitations

1. **Sample randomization.** The research subject pool consisted of a non-random selection of participants clustered at director-level and higher positions within the HR organization. Additionally, most of the leaders interviewed were from back-office and support HR functions. More balanced participation of employees from across HR is needed to avoid biasing findings and conclusions toward particular functions. In future studies, the sample should be representative of all HR subgroups and levels.
2. **Inconsistent interview methodology.** Interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes. In some instances, time constraints prevented asking a given participant the full battery of questions. In other cases, the emergent design of the interview led the conversation down an organic path, which yielded important but unanticipated information. Balancing a structured approach with emergent design is an important skill to assure the study gathers sufficiently consistent information across participants to support the value and validity of findings. Future study designs should allow enough time to pose the entire battery of questions and additional time for emergent conversation.
3. **Small sample size.** Although the survey was sent to 30 individuals, only 14 responded. Quantitative research ideally draws a broad enough population to assure generalizability of the findings. Of the original 30 who received the survey invitation, 15 leaders were selected to participate in an interview. Only 13 completed an interview. In qualitative research, sample sizes may be smaller, but need to be large enough to assure validity of the results. Determining adequate sample size in qualitative research is ultimately a matter of judgment and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the uses to which it will be applied (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). Small sample sizes may preclude researchers from drawing valid conclusions. If this study were repeated, it would be important to calculate the necessary population required to ensure statistically significant quantitative results for the survey in advance and continue conducting research until the volume of responses met the minimum threshold for significance within an acceptable margin of error. For qualitative data collection, it would be important to conduct interviews until new patterns, codes or themes for each question ceased to emerge from respondents.
4. **Power dynamics.** Researcher and participant biases and power dynamics may have limited this research, as the researcher was known to the participants as a manager with significant responsibilities related to enhancing the agility of

HR in the target company. It is good research practice for the researcher to be a neutral party to the research organization, topic, and participants (Punch, 2005). Neutrality helps reduce participant biases. In this study, participants' knowledge of the researcher's position and responsibilities may have consciously or subconsciously biased them to provide more favorable perspectives and ideas about organizational agility within the HR organization than they actually believed. Future studies could reduce this limitation by arranging the help of third-party research personnel who have neutral perspectives about organizational agility and no formal or informal authority within the case organization.

Suggestions for Further Research

1. Examine the interaction of leadership behaviors, culture, and agility. It would be beneficial to further examine the interaction of leadership behaviors, culture, and agility to validate, disprove, or augment the findings of this study. The sampling approach used in this study limited participation to a small population of leadership roles within the organization. Additional research with an expanded sample set may yield new or different outcomes.
2. Investigate change management strategies specific to adjusting processes for perceiving the environment. Additional investigation of change management strategies specific to adjusting processes for perceiving the environment could be valuable. Researchers should review the conclusions and recommendations from this chapter and partner with leaders inside the HR organization to pilot action research initiatives that would result in more confidently implemented operational processes.

Summary

This study examined the nature of agility and impacts of internal processes on agility within the HR function of a telecommunications organization. Fourteen personnel were surveyed, and 13 leaders were interviewed from the study organization regarding their understanding and assessment of agility in their organization, their organization's ability to perceive their environment, and the impact of HR processes and practices on organizational agility.

Participants understood the concept of organizational agility and gauged their organization as having a moderate but evolving level of agility. Participants perceived their organization as having variable effectiveness at perceiving their environments,

largely due to lack of appropriate organizational tools, processes, and strategic frameworks. Participants indicated that organizational efforts to enhance agility are still relatively new. While some benefits are anticipated or early signs are evident, more time will be needed to ascertain their full effect. Several recommendations are offered to the HR organization and organization development practitioners to continue to increase the level of agility in the organization.

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Appendix A: Organizational Survey

One of the goals of the Strategy and Planning organization is to help the HR team improve how we listen to the broader organization, collect information, and then aggregate, interpret, and synthesize it in an effort to better organize, communicate and plan. The intent of this short survey is to build a baseline understanding of our current state capabilities.

Responses to this survey will be anonymized but will be aggregated by function, department, job level or other structures as appropriate to assist in process improvement efforts.

D1: Please choose your level within the organization. [Single Selection]

1. VP or above
2. Director / Sr. Director
3. Manager / Sr. Manager
4. Individual contributor

Q1: THIS QUESTION IS ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION. Organizational agility refers to an organization's ability to make timely, effective, and sustained changes that maintain superior performance. Given this definition, think about how HR traditionally operates. Would you say, in general, that...

[Single-select: 1-Not at all, 2-A little, 3-To some extent, 4-To a moderate extent, 5-To a large extent]

- HR has a clear vision
- HR has a clear strategy
- The HR strategy is appropriately aligned with the overall company objectives
- HR assesses the business landscape and adapts well to external forces
- HR has a long-term strategy
- HR has internal structure or process to help information flow easily
- HR is a "learning organization"

Q2: THIS QUESTION IS ABOUT YOU PERSONALLY. Organizational agility refers to an organization's ability to make timely, effective, and sustained changes that maintain superior performance. Given this definition, think your role and the work you do. Please rate your level of agreement with the following statements.

[Single-select: 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neutral/Indifferent, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree]

- I know how my work supports the HR vision
- I know how my work contributes to the success of the company
- I regularly collaborate with others within HR
- Management practices help me feel connected, knowledgeable and equipped to do my job

- The majority of the time, I have all the information I need to make well-informed decisions.
- Roles and responsibilities are clear throughout the organization

Q3: Chose the style that best aligns with your view of management within the HR organization?

[Single-select: 1-Not at all, 2-A little, 3-To some extent, 4-To a moderate extent, 5-To a large extent]

- Authoritarian (Command & Control, Fear uncertainty and doubt, Micromanagement),
- Extroverted (Charismatic, Transformational, Transactional, Servant, Complex adaptive),
- Political (Mushroom, Campaign),
- Administrative (Process or Rule Driven),
- Democratic (Participatory, Consensus),
- Laissez-faire (Cowboy, Seagull, Trust but verify),
- Cultural (Paternalistic)
- Other

Q4: Please rate the effectiveness of the following internal processes

Rating scale:

Needs significant improvement	Some improvement needed	No improvement needed
0	6	10

- Work prioritization within HR
- Capex
- Opex
- Visibility to initiatives and resource allocation
- Budget management
- Labor management
- Internal communications (within HR)
- 'Push'—(Email)
- 'Pull'—(HR Today, Intranet Portal)
- Management cascade
- Collaboration tools (MS Teams, SharePoint, Slack etc)
- Program Management (evergreen work)
- Project Management (fixed cycle work)
- Organizational "Listening" (aka: does HR know what is happening around it?)

Q5: HR has the organizational agility appropriate for demands of the business.

[Single-select: 1-Strongly disagree, 2-Disagree, 3-Neutral/Indifferent, 4-Agree, 5-Strongly Agree]

[OPEN TEXT RESPONSE]

Q6: Organizational Agility: Perception

Rating scale:

Not at all	Somewhat	Very much
0	6	10

- How attuned is the HR organization to the internal environment (within HR)?
- How attuned is the HR organization to the external environment (broader [Company] business)?
- How attuned is the HR organization to (HR) industry trends?
- How attuned is the HR organization to (telecommunication) industry trends/news?
- How effectively does HR process or interpret these inputs?
 - Please describe in more detail [OPEN TEXT]
- How much do these inputs influence HR strategy, or work within the organization?
 - Please describe in more detail [OPEN TEXT]

Appendix B: Survey Invitation Email

Organizational Agility Survey Email

To: < **SURVEY PARTICIPANT LIST** >

From: Nathan Bushey

Subject: Organizational Agility within HR—Initial Survey

Hello,

As many of you know, I'm currently working to complete my Master of Science in Organizational Development through Pepperdine University. For my thesis, I've decided to study organizational agility at [Company], specifically within the HR team.

I am writing to request your participation in this study. Participation will involve completing a 15-minute survey to provide your opinion maturity of our existing capabilities. You can access the survey here:

<**SURVEY LINK**>

Participation is voluntary and confidential. You would not be identified in the study and any answers you provide would be pooled with others' responses and reported in aggregate.

I sincerely thank you for your help!

Thank you,
Nathan

Appendix C: Interview Guide

One of the goals of the Strategy and Planning organization is to help the HR team improve how we listen to the broader organization, collect information, and then aggregate, interpret and synthesize it in an effort to better organize, communicate and plan. The intent of this interview is to deepen the understanding of agility, specifically HR's ability to perceive the environment (internal & external), adapt and take appropriate action.

1. Please describe what organizational agility means to you.
2. How "Agile" is the HR organization?
3. Why is organizational agility important for HR?
4. How attuned is the HR organization to the internal/external environment (organizational perception)? Please describe this in more detail.
5. How well does HR process environmental input and take appropriate action?
6. What is the biggest barrier to improving organizational perception?
7. What is the biggest barrier to overall organizational agility within HR?
8. What ideas do you have to improve HR's ability to "listen"/perceive to aid in evolving OA?
9. Over the last 2 months, the Strategy & Planning team implemented a new information collection, planning and communications approach. Were you aware of this effort?
 - a. If so, describe your understanding of the goal of the effort?
 - b. What do you think the impact of the intervention was, if anything, the functioning and agility of the HR function?
10. What else would you share about organizational agility?

Appendix D: Interview Invitation

To: <INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT LIST>

From: Nathan Bushey

Subject: Organizational Agility within HR – Interview Request

Hello,

One of the goals of the Strategy and Planning organization is to help the HR team improve how we listen to the broader organization, collect information, and then aggregate, interpret and synthesize it in an effort to better organize, communicate and plan for the function.

Earlier this month, I sent you a link to a survey designed to gather your initial perspective about organizational agility within HR at [Company]. I'd like to schedule a 30-minute interview with you to dig a bit deeper into the topic and better understand where/how we can improve. This is being conducted as part of my Master of Science in Organizational Development at Pepperdine University.

My assistant will be scheduling time for us to connect the week of <DATE>. I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Please know that participation is voluntary and confidential. You would not be identified in the study and any answers you provide would be pooled with others' responses and reported in aggregate.

Thank you,

Nathan

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graziadio Business School

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Enhancing Organizational Agility Within the Human Resources Function

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Nathan Bushey at Pepperdine University, because you are an employee working in the Human Resources organization at [Company]. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. You will also be given a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature of agility and impacts of internal processes on agility within the HR function of a telecommunications organization.

STUDY PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a short survey and potentially participate in an in-person interview.

Survey

The survey will consist of a series of questions related to organizational agility.

The majority of the survey questions will ask you to rate various dimensions of agility, management styles, or the effectiveness of internal processes. The survey is estimated to take 15 minutes.

The survey will be conducted online via Survey Monkey.

The data and information from these surveys will be stored securely and all information will be treated with confidentiality. Your individual responses will not be shared.

Interview

At the end of the research window, you will be invited to participate in a 30-45 minute interview which will occur in-person at [Company] HQ or over the phone, where the

principle researcher will ask you more detailed questions about your perception of organizational agility within Human Resources.

The data and information from the interview will be stored securely and all information will be treated with confidentiality. Your individual responses will not be shared. Additionally, for the interview, you will not be subject to video or audio recording.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

No more than minimal risk.

Potential breach of confidentiality or disclosure, however data collected will not have any personally identifiable information.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, information collected through this research process may be used to further refine or adapt business processes which seek to improve organizational agility within [Company].

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records collected for this study will be confidential as far as permitted by law. However, if required to do so by law, it may be necessary to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if disclosed any instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the principal investigator's place of residence. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years and then will be destroyed. Information collected will be aggregated, coded and de-identified.

While no individual responses will be shared, the outcome of the research may be socialized in summary form with members of [Company's] HR Leadership Team or [Company's] HR Strategy and Planning team.

SUSPECTED NEGLECT OR ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Under California law, the researcher(s) who may also be a mandated reporter will not maintain as confidential, information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information, he or she is required to report this abuse to the proper authorities.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or only completing the items for which you feel comfortable. Your relationship with your employer will not be affected whether you participate or not in this study.

INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION

You understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries you may have concerning the research herein described. You understand that you may contact Nathan Bushey and Dr. Miriam Lacey if you have any other questions or concerns about this research.

Nathan Bushey
[contact information]

Dr. Miriam Lacey
[contact information]

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500 Los Angeles, CA 90045, [contact information].