

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

# How Learning and Development Are Becoming More Agile

by Jon Younger  
OCTOBER 11, 2016



Today's workforces are designed for speed and flexibility. To achieve these goals, organizations are using more part-time, project-based freelancers to supplement their internal staff. Our [research](#) at the Agile Talent Collaborative reinforces findings from [Accenture](#) and other consulting and research firms: the use of freelancers — or [agile talents](#) as we call them — is growing, and for reasons that go well beyond cost efficiency. According to executives surveyed by the Collaborative, access to

difficult-to-find technical or functional expertise, speed, flexibility, and innovation are the top five drivers of using talent outside your organization.

But none articulates the workforce of the future as well as the observation of HR executives in a series of recent workshops we've led in Hong Kong, Western Europe, and Silicon Valley. When asked about the composition of the workforce in 5-10 years, HR leaders consistently report that, in their judgment, full-time permanent employees will account for only about 50% of their staff.

What does this mean for workforce learning and development? As Patty Woolcock, the executive director of CSHRP, the California Strategic HR Partnership, says: "The future of learning is three 'just's': just enough, just-in-time, and just-for-me." It means that training is going to have to be just as agile as the workforce — where speed, flexibility, and innovation are key. It means that more learning will happen in teams, and on platforms where training can be delivered any time, any place, at the user's convenience. In particular, we see several interesting developments:

**Technology-supported peer learning is disrupting the old paradigm.** Training magazine reported that [2015 training expenditures were approximately \\$70 billion dollars](#), a 14% increase from 2014. A growing percentage of this investment supports peer learning. For example, JOLT, a new startup, offers companies access to video-based learning from recognized technical experts in a wide variety of functional areas, providing a just in time skill "jolt" to individuals or teams on exactly the topic they need. Teva recently used JOLT for its R&D Communication team, providing public speaking skills from a PR professional in an online, video-based, and highly interactive workshop. Instead of weeks to organize an expensive, on-site, day long workshop on teamwork (arranging facilities, ensuring "butts in seats"), JOLT gave the team just what they needed, when they needed it, at a fraction of the cost, and delivered by a professional with high credibility.

**Team-based learning is providing more benefits.** DAMCO, the multi-billion dollar Logistics division of AP Moller Maersk, has taken a different peer tact: utilizing team-based learning that starts with identifying solutions to critical market opportunities and threats. Each year 40 high potential young leaders from around the globe come together and work in teams on projects like "How do we grow our business in the chemicals industry?" or "What is the growth potential for business in Mexico?" These projects accomplish several ends: they establish strong working relationships among individuals that pay off in global collaboration. They enable individuals to learn from and respect the best practices of different regions, and adopt or adapt best practices for back home advantage. And, they reinforce the global strength of DAMCO for the global companies that DAMCO serves. Now in its 7th year, DAMCO's investment in young commercial leaders has grown because the ROI of the program has been considerable, measured both in financial terms and in the growth of new business opportunity.

**Bringing customers and providers together is becoming more common.** I'll be joining Toptal, the agile talent staffing firm, at an upcoming conference on innovation through agile talent, where 60 primarily tech managers and directors from a wide range of companies — from huge organizations

like Wal-Mart to startups still working in incubators and seeking seed funding — will explore their experiences in working with freelance technical talent, and how they see the opportunities, challenges, and risks. This quick, two-hour event will inevitably create subsequent networking opportunities, learning opportunities, and collegial relationships that will last well beyond the actual event itself.

**Investment in the *whole* team is becoming more critical.** Organizations depend more on freelancers because they are more available and accessible as a result of platforms like Toptal, and because they lack the in-place talent needed to complete critical projects. As a senior tech leader at Wal-Mart put it, “It often just takes too long to recruit, hire and on-board full-time staff.” These agile talents are matched to projects typically for 3 to 6 months. In past, these individuals were often kept at arm’s length, and treated as marginal to the “real” team. That’s changing – slowly, but clearly. For example, Qualcomm includes its agile talent when the team is in training. So does ScanDisk and Shire. This is an important shift for both the organization and for the agile talents themselves. When treated as a full member of the team, rather than as outsiders, the productivity and satisfaction of the freelancer grows, as does project performance. As importantly, more and more top agile talents, for example those represented by 10X Management, are only interested in working in environments where the work is interesting, and they are welcomed as a team member. Companies that want to attract the best technical talent, need to treat them accordingly in order to develop a reputation of interest to the best of the agile talent community.

**Development, not deficiency, is motivating learning.** Millennials and Generation Z have a different view of workplace learning. They understand more than the rest of us that rapid and discontinuous change in products, services and ways of working mean that life-long learning is a critical element of the workplace. Deloitte points out that for millennial professionals, ongoing development support trumps all other “benefits.” Bersin, a Deloitte division focused on employee development, recently [reported](#) that over 35 million workers have enrolled in MOOC’s such as Coursera and edX in the past year. This in turn has given rise to innovative cross-organizational collaboration in learning of a variety of forms. For example, ADIA, the sovereign wealth fund of the UAE, chooses external investment partners based in part on their ability to contribute to the ongoing development of their full-time staff.

These developments in training reflect the broader trend in how organizations are rethinking the resources they need to perform and grow in an increasingly competitive global marketplace. As the agile workforce evolves, so organizations need to rethink how they approach training for the full workforce.

---

**Jon Younger** is the founder of the [Agile Talent Collaborative](#), a non-profit research organization, and works with several start-ups in the on-demand staffing space. He is the co-author of several books in talent management and HR, including [Agile Talent](#) (HBR Press, 2016). He teaches in the executive education faculties of the University of Michigan and the Indian School of Business. He can be reached at [jon@agiletalentco.com](mailto:jon@agiletalentco.com).

---

Copyright 2016 Harvard Business Publishing. All Rights Reserved. Additional restrictions may apply including the use of this content as assigned course material. Please consult your institution's librarian about any restrictions that might apply under the license with your institution. For more information and teaching resources from Harvard Business Publishing including Harvard Business School Cases, eLearning products, and business simulations please visit [hbsp.harvard.edu](http://hbsp.harvard.edu).