# Building an Agile Workforce: How to Ask the Right Questions

**The agile workforce was well on its way before the pandemic hit, but COVID's lingering presence has kicked it into overdrive. For many leaders this leaves them wondering how to best reconfigure their teams without compromising objectives and culture—all while mitigating risks. Ian Brenner provides the right questions you should be asking.**

When the pandemic hit in early 2020, it thrust many organizations into countless changes that needed to be completed at break-neck speed. Storefronts were closed and office employees went home. Product and service lines were stopped, started or redesigned.

In the early days, speed and efficiency were the order of the day. The rapid adoption of technology was a saviour for many businesses—in a way that couldn't have been accomplished even a few years ago. More fundamentally, the impact on the relationship between management and the workforce has been profound and will be lasting. Organizations have removed boundaries, fostered cross-functional teams and embraced creative ways of sourcing the talent they need from inside and outside.

The talent landscape witnessed the emergence of the agile workforce well before COVID, however the pandemic has spurred the pace of adoption, for several reasons.

First, the initial crisis was one of dislocation, with organizations scrambling for the expertise needed to salvage basic communication with customers and employees in a virtual environment. For many, this meant hiring short-term talent in technology and logistics, though some faced more fundamental crises.

Second, businesses found that their talent needs had changed (at least for the duration of the "physical distancing" phenomenon). Services, products and distribution shifted with demand and legal constraints. For many firms, this raised a dilemma: What talent do we need and how long will we need it?

Third, we have a new-found acceptance of the remote worker, a description that now fits everyone from the CEO down. Despite real concerns around the loss of human connection and the challenge of fostering innovation remotely, this forced experiment in alternate work arrangements has built a sense of confidence that workers can be effective without the need for traditional eight-hour-a-day facetime.

As organizations reconfigure to face the challenges of the times, the agile workforce continues to grow out of need and a renewed acceptance. Every situation is different, but once strategies are reset, all companies need to start by rethinking their basic requirements for talent, before landing on the specific structure or role. To this end, we propose a set of questions to be considered by leadership teams trying to (re)configure their human resource needs:

## What are the skills required to complete a task or achieve an outcome?

- Do we have the necessary skills in-house?

- Are the required skills specialized or more of a commodity by nature?

- Are the skills available in the market?

- Can we reskill or train our existing employees?

- Is it important to gain outside experience or perspective?

## What is the nature, scope and timing of the work?

- Do we have a comprehensive understanding of workflows, with related interdependencies?

- Is the work project-based, i.e., focused on a certain definable endpoint?

- Is the work analytical and advisory in nature, or is implementation also involved?

- How soon does the position need to be filled, and is there time to find and onboard a full-time hire?

- If the work is ongoing, is it of a part-time nature, i.e., less than the traditional 40 hours per week?

# How do we manage the risks?

- Do we want to own whatever intellectual property (IP) is created by the workflow? If so, how do we protect it and who will make sure they understand it?

- Are there reputational risks from entrusting the particular type of work to agile workers?

- Are we comfortable with outsourced workers handling customer-facing tasks? Conversely, are our customers comfortable with this approach?

- If the person is to work remotely, can they be effective in the role, adequately connected internally and responsibly managed?

# What are the cultural implications?

- How will our culture be impacted by the arrival of contractors?

- Is there the need for a change agent to be introduced, without creating a sense of panic?

- How receptive is our own culture in accommodating agile workers?

- Is there education or preparation required internally before we outsource work or hire an interim resource?

How we answer these questions can go a long way to determine the structure of the hire. Of course, the choice of structure can be quite broad and goes well beyond the use of internal versus external workers. It includes all shapes of agile workers, including part-time, contract, freelance, interim and combinations thereof.

In this respect, it's also useful to compare the relative benefits of an interim resource, who would effectively be hired as an employee, versus a consultant, who would be contracted for more specific advice or deliverables.

## Interim

- usually has more depth of operational experience—particularly useful in implementation

- can be given managerial authority

- potential transition to full-time

- often the same budget can stretch over a longer period

## Consultant

- has often seen more diverse business issues and has broader experience

- can scale resources more readily

- brings experience in driving change without authority

- works effectively in existing team

# Rethinking talent

It's logical to focus first on the nature of the need to be filled—is it short or long-term? Outcome-focused or ongoing? Specialized or commodity? However, much will hinge on the attributes of the organization itself—not just the talent it already has in place, but also the cultural aspects of the business. Ultimately, it's not just about the fit between the person and the position, but also the fit with the organization itself.

As companies continue to grapple with talent issues, the agile workforce will continue to entrench itself in the corporate world. While each business will have their unique strategies to move forward, leaders need to start by rethinking how talent is both deployed and integrated—and it starts with asking the rights questions.

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