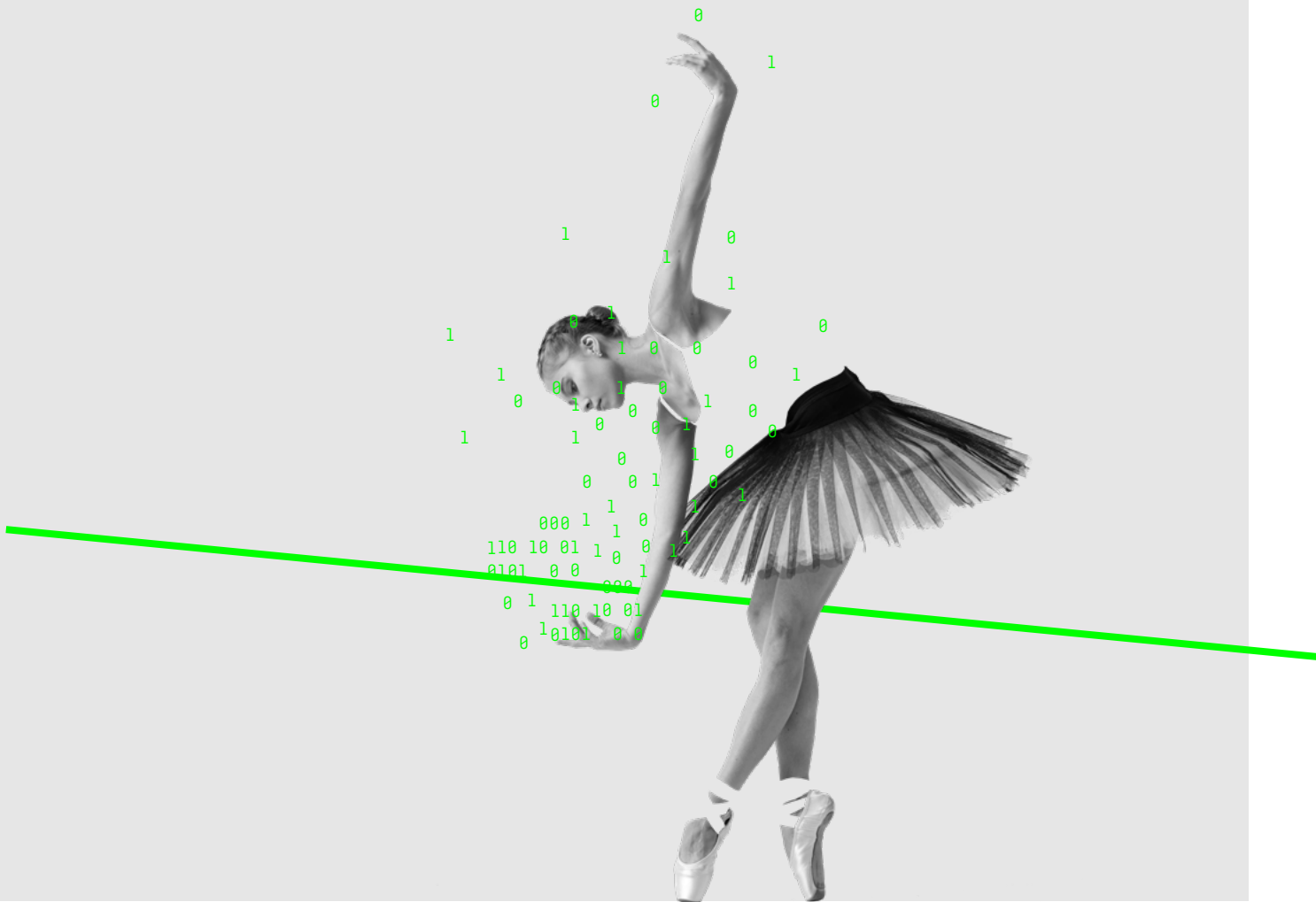# Agile: nothing is impossible

EXPERT ARTICLE
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The ability to adapt quickly to a changing world has always been a key success factor in the digital transformation. The past year really put that ability to the test, as companies strove to reinvent themselves while remaining both resilient and innovative. They had to move fast to institute and optimise new approaches to work and working together. "Agile" is a term we have all heard before but it took on a whole new significance during the pandemic.

What, exactly, is "Agile"? To some, it is a methodology or mindset. Others think of it as a framework. In reality, Agile is a fast and adaptable way of working; a way of getting to grips with a complex, uncertain environment and ultimately prevailing over it. At the same time, Agile represents a high degree of trust, transparency, teamwork, and a deeply ingrained focus on the customer. COVID-19 turned the world on its head in short order. Within weeks we all had to adjust our plans and get used to new ways of living and working. Along with the challenges came opportunities, however. The resulting changes will leave a lasting mark on the working world.

Reinvention as a skill
Our familiar ways of working were transformed almost overnight. Teams used to swapping ideas across a shared office were suddenly forced to function in isolation. Many trusted conventional means of communication and collaboration were rendered obsolete. But not all: Agile mindsets and methods have come out of this period of heightened complexity and uncertainty very well. When

nothing is clear and nothing feels safe, yet businesses still have to adapt fast, the answer is to create the clarity and security of reliable processes to get the job done. If the situation changes unexpectedly, as it often did last year, Agile allows you to make the tweaks that make the difference.

The capacity to adapt and respond quickly was a key driver of digitalisation even pre-COVID but now it is practically a survival skill. Companies that are organisationally agile are adaptable, flexible and creative at the same time as operating conditions change around them. They can react swiftly to internal and external opportunities and threats, and take stock of progress before moving to the next stage. That is a crucial skill if the business model seems under threat, new trends are taking over, or the company's very existence is at stake. Agile businesses have internalised the need always to rethink, refocus and redefine progress time and again.

Recognising an Agile organisation
Agile companies have rapid learning and decision-making cycles that allow them to respond efficiently to changes in the market

or in their business environment. They concentrate on the needs of their customers, who generally don't want standardised products and services but bespoke ones. So that is what they offer because this laser-sharp focus on customer needs is part of their DNA.

Instead of optimising business processes to maximise earnings, these companies concentrate on customised solutions. And while profits are no less important for agile organisations, they are made by generating added value.

Structurally, they are built on a tight network of well-trained, empowered teams that are supported by technology and driven by a common goal. Independent responsibility, transparency and open communication between equals are the norm. We should not forget, either, that Agile companies are always willing to change existing structures, processes and operational systems to align themselves as closely as possible with what the customer wants.

Prizing people
Organisations that work according to Agile principles are generally people-centric. Companies are

"The capacity to adapt and respond quickly is vital in anticipating the future successfully."
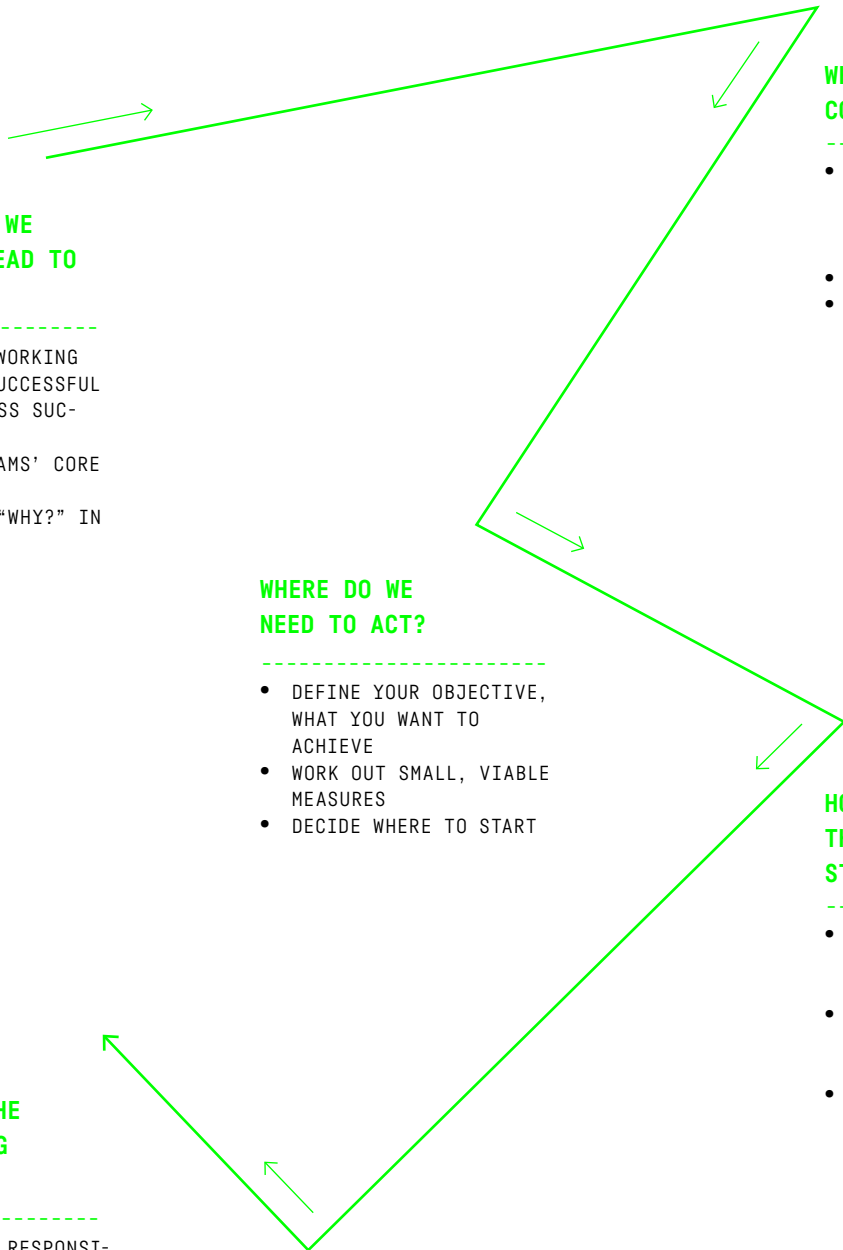
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"Agile represents a high degree of trust, transparency, teamwork and a deeply ingrained focus on the customer."

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Implementing agile working methods sustainably

WHAT ARE OTHER COMPANIES DOING?

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- USE OTHER COMPANIES' EXPERIENCE AS A POINT OF REFERENCE AND SOURCE OF INSPIRATION
- WORK OUT BEST PRACTICES
- APPLY TO YOUR OWN SITUATION

WHAT PATH ARE WE ON? DOES IT LEAD TO SUCCESS?

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- WHAT WAYS OF WORKING DISTINGUISH SUCCESSFUL TEAMS FROM LESS SUC-CESSFUL ONES?
- DEFINE THE TEAMS' CORE PRACTICES
- IDENTIFY THE "WHY?" IN EACH CASE

WHERE DO WE NEED TO ACT?

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- DEFINE YOUR OBJECTIVE, WHAT YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE
- WORK OUT SMALL, VIABLE MEASURES
- DECIDE WHERE TO START

HOW DO WE TAKE THE FIRST SMALL STEPS?

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- QUICKLY PRODUCE AN INITIAL PROTOTYPE AND EXPERIMENT FROM THERE
- GET FEEDBACK FROM THOSE INVOLVED AND THOSE AFFECTED
- LEARN FROM YOUR FINDINGS AND EXPAND YOUR PROTOTYPE

HOW CAN WE INTERNALISE THE MOST PROMISING APPROACHES?

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- ADJUST ROLES, RESPONSI-BILITIES, PROCESSES AND STRUCTURES WHERE NECES-SARY
- PROVIDE THE NECESSARY INFRASTRUCTURE AND TECHNOLOGY
- REGULAR, TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION AT ALL LEVELS ABOUT TARGETS, HOW TO ACHIEVE THEM AND THE REASONS FOR CHANGE

WHAT EFFECT ARE WE HAVING?

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- DEFINE SUCCESS INDICATORS
- MEASURE RESULTS
- RECORD AND COMMUNICATE RESULTS

ecosystems in which everyone has a particular role: people who use the products and services, manufacture them, buy and sell them, and finance them. Customers and teams are the two main groups here.

Employees are encouraged to continue growing and expanding their capabilities. The result is a continuous stream of new ideas, a culture of cooperation and a workforce that is intrinsically motivated. Their enthusiasm rubs off on their customers and they provide an outstanding service.

The work-from-home order forced such people-centric companies, that thrive on personal interaction, into a particularly rapid rethink. How could they recreate that essential connection? Regular contact keeps an agile team spirit alive, helping to break down the screen wall during meetings. Agile companies recognised this and swiftly implemented virtual ways of ensuring inter-team knowledge transfer, maintaining relationships and building rapport.

Team thinking
To get through uncertain times, companies need teams that take independent responsibility and have the autonomy to act for themselves in the market but still come together to respond to crisis and change. These teams are entrepreneurial and ready to input. They recognise opportunities and take them. They see failure as a part of the learning process, not as a stumbling block.

Furthermore, amid change, agile teams can just keep working without any significant loss of productivity. They adapt backlogs to changing priorities and are able to shift focus quickly if required.

If you know your business targets, their individual weightings and their context, you can set new priorities within a few days, from the individual to the team to the department and the entire company. Focus is second nature to Agile organisations. From business to IT, they embed customer focus in their processes and keep structures lean, empower their staff and bring capabilities together.

**A turning point:
the key to reactivity**
Agile or not, most companies were forced into a faster pace of decision-making during the pandemic. Under immense pressure, they had just a few days or weeks to set up an operating infrastructure that would allow hundreds, if not thousands, of people to work from home. Trying out new approaches in small steps is fundamental to adjusting to change like this.

In fact, many companies followed the Agile playbook without even knowing it. Agile thinking and action ultimately helped the business sector as a whole to manage life under lockdown. As the economy begins to open up, companies must now decide how far they want to explore these new ways of doing things and how far they want to retrace their steps.

Where Agile working has been born of necessity, as more of a quick fix than a long-term solution, it needs to be consciously adopted and stabilised. As soon as possible, companies must arrive at a state that is acceptable to all and that allows employees to manage change effectively in the future. There is no single right way of doing this. The whole point is to experiment with new ways, to reflect on them and to learn.

Post-COVID, the pace of change will not slow much, so it is important to create an organisation that is agile enough to keep up. For that reason, it can really pay off to take an Agile approach or at least to adopt those Agile methods that will make the company more resilient and give it a critical competitive edge. Having earned new respect during the pandemic, the Agile mindset is here to stay. **/>**

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