

LEADING THE AGILE TRANSFORMATION

HOW COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENTS CAN BECOME MORE AGILE

As an organizational function that is deeply affected by all changes in the external and internal environment of an organization, corporate communications has recently been forced to cope with the challenges associated with agility – not only as a driver of the topic but also because it is simultaneously driven by its implications. The communication department can play a central role in the transformation of an organization into a more agile entity. This demands a different set-up of communication departments as well as new competencies from the people working within them. This chapter explores how communication departments adapt their own structures, processes and culture accordingly. The insights are based on in-depth interviews with 38 chief communication officers from large, multinational companies, complemented by case studies and an evaluation of existing interdisciplinary research on agility.

What is needed to establish an agile organization or department?

There are six major factors that provide an entire organization or a single department with the means to become more agile. Leaders need to align these factors when setting up agile structures. The next chapters will explore in more detail how a communication department can become agile itself and how it can help to build a more agile organization overall.

As the six factors, also referred to as agility providers, overlap to a certain extent, we have grouped them into three areas:

1 Structures & Processes: Agile structures and processes are an important prerequisite for flexibility and speed. Linear, bureaucratic structures with rigid chains of command tend to slow down decisions. Working in functional silos creates redundancies and a lack of information and transparency, meaning that inefficiency is a common result. Thus, agile

organizations work towards flatter hierarchies. They decentralize power, establish iterative decision-making processes and set up cross-functional teams.

2 Culture & People: Agile organizations come to life through the people working within them. Creating a different mindset and corporate culture are probably the most important providers of agility. Executives and team members alike require a new openness and willingness to work in cross-functional teams with a stronger emphasis on collaboration, interaction, and knowledge sharing. Incentives and career options need to be revised when leadership positions are dismantled.

3 Tools & Technologies: A number of agile methods and tools such as Scrum, Design Thinking or Kanban are helpful when working towards an agile organization. Furthermore, technologies such as digital collaboration tools and knowledge management platforms support agile working.

Relevant dimensions of agile organizations and departments (agility providers)

STRUCTURES

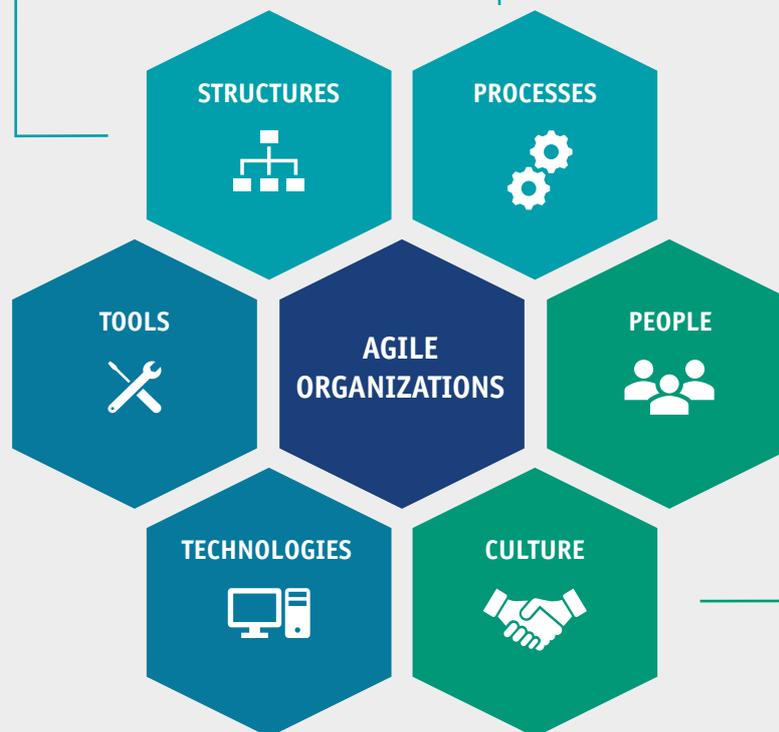
Agile organizations are based on a network of empowered teams – if needed these are supplemented by experts from different departments and are independent of hierarchies. Work is based on flat structures and task related roles. Hands-on governance and decentralization of power speed up decision making. This can (but must not) be supported by an open physical work space.

PROCESSES

Quicker decision and learning cycles, for instance through rapid iteration and experimentation, help organizations to reach results more quickly. Standardized ways of working (e.g. with the help of agile tools) help to make these processes transparent and more efficient. Processes should incorporate regular feedback (retrospective) and knowledge sharing elements.

PEOPLE

Executives and employees require a new mindset with an openness for collaboration, sharing and self-management. They need to be open to engage in interdisciplinary team work and enact a large number of different roles. This goes along with new competencies, often described as 'entrepreneurial drive'. Companies have to invest in continuous training and keep people motivated by new incentives and career options. Executives have to develop a new leadership style with a focus on encouraging followers to take over responsibility and support self-organization.



TOOLS

A variety of agile working methods exist, including well-established tools such as Scrum, Kanban or Design Thinking. They prescribe elements and techniques to run projects in a more agile way.

TECHNOLOGIES

Virtual digital collaboration and organization tools help flexible structures to come alive. Project management software and knowledge management platforms constitute the (mainly digital) technological backbone. They help to run projects with team members spread out in different locations, record insights, and store knowledge.

CULTURE

For agile initiatives to thrive, a strategic cultural change is needed based on collaboration and sharing. Enabling and empowering people are major success factors. At the same time, mistakes and risks need to be tolerated to a larger extent.

Which roles do communication departments play in agile organizations?

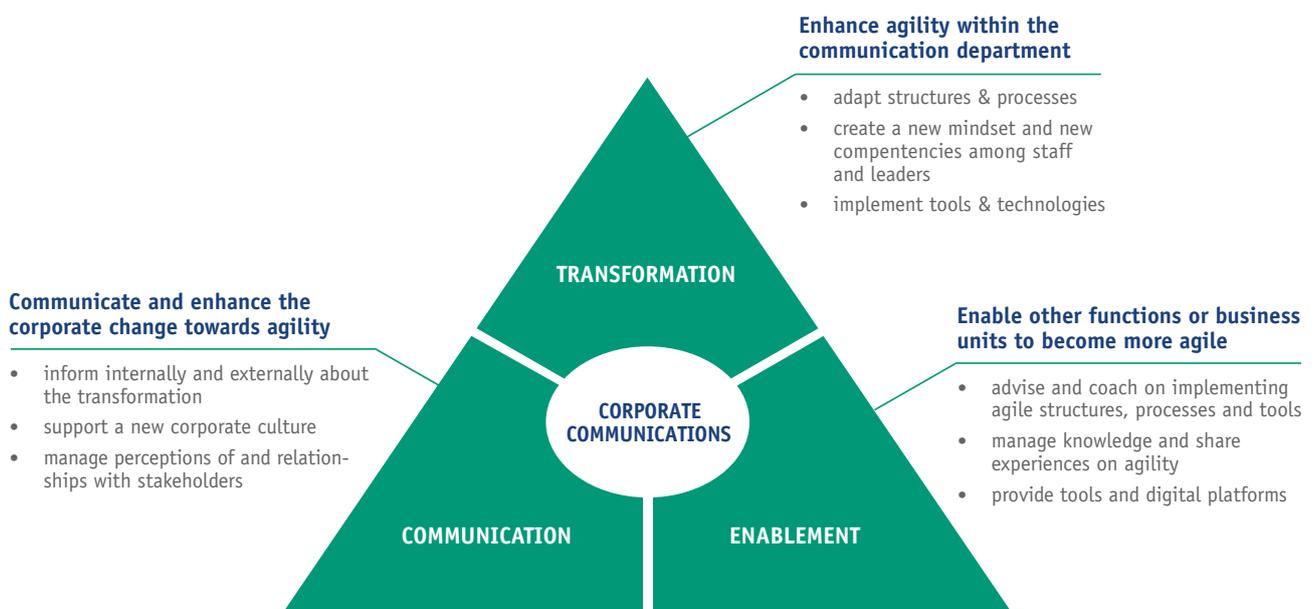
There are three overall tasks for communication departments in the context of agility:

1 Communication: A core task of communications is to inform internal and external stakeholders about major changes in the strategy and organizational design. It is important to explain the necessity of said changes, provide roadmaps, cultivate positive images, and stimulate support. These tasks are not new or restricted to change projects aimed at agility, but our research shows that communication departments are nearly always involved when large change programs linked to digital transformation are initiated. Sometimes they even take the lead, and they often work closely with human resources. Conveying the spirit of agility and thus enhancing the corporate reputation can help to improve the internal appreciation of the communication department. Apart from the change process, it has to be noted that agile organizations place much emphasis on internal communications. This is necessary to support collaboration and flexible ways of co-working. As a consequence, the internal communications function will often be upgraded and gain in importance.

2 Enablement: Communication departments carry a special responsibility for driving overall organizational agility by enabling other members of the corporation. They can support top management, business units and other departments, for instance by advising on implementing agile structures, processes, and tools. Our research reveals that communication departments often act as pilots that are among the first units to experiment with agile work. Communications professionals act as coaches and advisors when it comes to agility, which supports the overall trend in businesses to build up internal knowledge and expertise. Along this line, communication departments can provide tools and platforms to facilitate agility. This includes internal knowledge bases, intranets, or social collaboration tools.

3 Transformation: The most challenging task is to transform the communication department itself. Just like other parts of the organization, communications are confronted with the challenge of utilizing their staff in more flexible ways, carrying out a growing number of tasks with the same resources, reacting more quickly to external and internal demands, and making processes more efficient. This requires a different culture of collaboration and a new mindset from everybody. Transforming their own department is the most pressing strategic issue for any chief communication officer (CCO) at the moment, as confirmed by our research.

The triple role of communication departments in agile organizations



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