

# Adding value with learning agility

## *How to identify and develop high-potential employees*

**T**here was a time when employees who had worked for many different organizations over various industries might have had their rich experience counted against them when applying for a new position. “Seems he/ she can’t stick at a job” or “They don’t seem to have made up their mind what they want to do” are typical of those blinkered attitudes.

That was then. This is now – a post-recession world where organizations are being forced to re-think their human resource management strategies. As marketplace complexity and dynamism increase, the importance of organizational agility moves to the forefront. In order for organizations to be adequately equipped to survive and thrive under fast-changing market conditions, their human capital – the cornerstone of competitive advantage – has to act accordingly.

The focus must be on the selection, development, and deployment of a workforce that is willing and able to engage in continuous learning, i.e. a workforce high in learning agility. This is especially true for high-potential employees – those considered most instrumental to their organization’s competitive advantage.

Contrary to that old-fashioned notion of sticking with something you know, it is likely that people who have spent most of their career within one single organizational or industry setting have developed a limited knowledge and skills base. Having a variety of experience is likely to better equip them to transfer previous learning to a new situation.

### **Above and beyond a baseline prediction by job performance**

The fast-changing demographic and employee engagement trends characteristic of the post-recession economy has forced organizations to acknowledge that developing employee learning agility is crucial due to the unpredictability of the end-state competencies that will be needed to cope with future business challenges. The question remains whether and how they incorporate this factor into their daily activities and assessments.

Nicky Dries of the University of Leuven’s Research Center for Organization Studies, Belgium, and Tim Vantilborgh and Roland Permans, both of the Department of Work and Organizational Psychology at the Vrije Universiteit, Brussels, maintain that it is in organizations’ best interests to incorporate some form of learning agility assessment in their high potential identification and development processes. Their study examined the extent to which a measure of learning agility is able to predict being identified as a high potential above and beyond a baseline prediction by job performance. In short, the added



value of learning agility over job performance in assessments of employee potential (Dries *et al.*, 2012).

In practice individual job performance is still the cornerstone of high potential identification processes in many organizations. Few would argue, however, that potential can be detected from current performance in an area the person already knows well. Many managers and executives derail because they tend to depend largely on the same skills that got them promoted in the first place rather than learning new ones – leading to the view that all high potentials are high performers, but not all high performers are high potentials. Nicky Dries *et al.* conclude that “although high performance may be a precondition to being identified as a high potential, learning agility is an overriding criterion for separating high potentials from non-high potentials.”

### Essential to ensure high employee commitment

Organizations need to make sure that not only the performance and the learning agility of their high potentials is high, but also their commitment. In order to achieve high commitment, organizations need to establish an employment relationship with their high potentials based on mutual benefit. Previous studies on talent management have outlined the following perceived benefits of being identified as a high potential:

- having high job security;
- advancing more quickly than peers;
- having a more successful career in the traditional sense (i.e. pay and promotions); and
- receiving preferential treatment.

Organizations need to keep these motivators in mind in the design of their talent management systems. If high potentials’ achievements are to result in sustained competitive advantage for their employing organizations, then these employees must be willing to stay where they are.

With regard to the advantages of career variety, the authors maintain that if organizations want to establish a workforce high in learning agility, introducing HRM interventions to increase their employees’ career variety might be the way forward. For instance, organizations can boost the degree of institutional variety within their workforce by deliberately hiring people who have worked for many different organizations over various industries, or by allocating their current employees to stretch assignments that span multiple organizations.

### End-state competency assessments in performance appraisals

Likewise, they might enhance their employees’ functional variety by assigning them to job-rotation schemes or cross-departmental task forces. Furthermore, organizations need to become more aware of the fact that they themselves can create barriers to learning, even in their high potential programs. Being forced into a development track that moves either too fast or too slow, a lack of developmental opportunities, and constraints in terms of time, space and budget have all been mentioned as barriers hindering the transfer from learning agility to on-the-job learning behavior in high potential development programs.

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The relative value of “regular”, end-state competencies in predicting employee potential is strongly dependent on the degree to which they will still be relevant several years after assessment, as well as on the degree to which they can be developed, and over what period of time. A suggestion is to use end-state competency assessments in performance appraisals and learning agility assessments in high potential identification procedures. This might help organizations nominate better candidates, as it reduces the risk of the “hallo bias” effect.

*Keywords:*

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Potential appraisal,  
Talent management,  
Workplace learning,  
Employees

**Comment**

This review is based on “The role of learning agility and career variety in the identification and development of high potential employees” by Nicky Dries, Tim Vantilborgh and Roland Pepermans. Their study, conducted in a sample of seven best practice organizations in the field of high potential identification and development, examines the extent to which a measure of learning agility is able to predict being identified as a high potential above and beyond a baseline prediction by job performance. They also investigate whether employee learning agility can be developed by organizations by building on the literature about career variety and employee adaptability.

**Reference**

Dries, N., Vantilborgh, T. and Pepermans, R. (2012), “The role of learning agility and career variety in the identification and development of high potential employees”, *Personnel Review*, Vol. 41 No. 3, pp. 340-358.

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