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The Triple Role of Communications in Agile Organizations

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Abstract

This study presents the findings of multi-method research that explores the challenges and implications of the concept of *agility* for the field of strategic communication. Despite its omnipresence in business practice, research on agility in the domain of strategic communication is scarce. Thus, a four-step research process was conducted to link the interdisciplinary debate about agility to the field of strategic communication. First, a systematic literature review across various disciplines provided a comprehensive understanding of agility and its key dimensions. Second, several conceptual frameworks for agility were analyzed and the relevant aspects for strategic communication were synthesized. In the third step, the current impact of organizational agility on corporate communications was explored by conducting empirical in-depth interviews with chief communication officers and senior communication managers from 38 multinational companies. Finally, the theoretical, conceptual, and empirical insights

were combined to develop a framework for the role of strategic communication in the context of organizational agility. The findings of this study suggest that communication departments need to: a) adopt their own structures and processes, accordingly; b) enhance organizational agility by enabling other departments; and c) communicate the agile transformation internally by creating a new corporate culture and externally by shaping an agile image of the company.

Introduction

Currently, corporations face an increasingly complex environment, intense global competition, and an accelerated rate of innovative change in the marketplace. The digital transformation forces them to consider major adaptations in the domains of strategy, structure, product development, and service delivery. The move from postmodernity to hypermodernity in society (Lipovetsky, 2005) means that “change and flexibility are the normal state of being, not only for individuals but also for organizations” (Verhoeven, Zerfass, Verčič, Moreno, & Tench, 2018, p. 1). This requires a high level of flexibility encompassing the entire spectrum of activities within an organization. To this end, more and more corporations introduce new forms of division of labor and cooperation (Liu, Chen, & Chou, 2011; Loebbekke & Picot, 2015; Tseng & Lin, 2011). This helps to establish new fields of value creation, optimize existing processes, and increase overall efficiency and quality.

A big idea often discussed in this context is *agility* – meaning that organizations should become significantly more flexible, faster, and responsive by establishing new ways of planning (design thinking, scrum), organizing (self-organizing teams, collaboration, flatter hierarchies), and stakeholder interaction (Gunasekaran & Yusuf, 2002; Sherehiy, Karwowski, & Layer, 2007). While these are not necessarily new ideas, they have gained more attention in recent

years. The main reasons for this are external developments like shifts in technologies and customer behavior as well as unstable markets and political systems. Vertical structures make organizations slow and ineffective and hinder them from adapting quickly to such circumstances. Thus, companies start to restructure and realign their business processes, focusing on horizontal structures, flat hierarchies, self-management, and empowerment.

As an organizational function that is deeply affected by all changes in the external and internal environment of organizations, corporate communications has recently been forced to engage in different challenges associated with agility – both as a driver of the topic as well as by being driven by its implications. Communication departments are increasingly involved in new forms of cross-departmental cooperation (e.g., in interdisciplinary project groups comprised of members from different departments and business units). This puts new demands on the set-up of communication departments and the competencies of the people working within them. Despite its immediate importance to business practice, these challenges have not yet gained much academic attention within communication scholarship.

Therefore, this study attempts to fill this research gap. A four-step research process was conducted to link the ongoing debate about agility in other disciplines to the field of strategic communication. First, a systematic and interdisciplinary literature review in general management, organizational theory, production economics, supply chain management, and information and software technology provided a comprehensive understanding of agility and its most relevant dimensions. Second, several conceptual frameworks on agility were analyzed and the relevant aspects for communication management were synthesized (e.g., Sherehiy et al., 2007; Tseng & Lin, 2011; Wendler, 2013). Third, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with chief communication officers and senior communication managers from 38 multinational companies in Germany in order to explore and understand the impact of the concept

of agility on corporate communications today. Finally, we combined our theoretical, conceptual, and empirical insights to provide a deeper understanding about the role of corporate communications in agile organizations.

Literature review

The problem of how organizations can successfully deal with complex, unpredictable, dynamic, and constantly changing environments – today described as *vuca world* – has been a prevailing topic both in industry and academia for decades. Agility, although a buzzword and current management fashion (Cram & Newell, 2016), is not necessarily a new concept or new phenomenon (e.g., Sherehiy et al., 2007; Klein, 2017). Contingency theorists focused as early as the 1920s, and especially in the 1960s, on the relationship between organizations and their dynamic environment (e.g., Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Katz & Kahn, 1966; Weick, 1995). Later, Senge advocated the *learning organization* (Senge, 1990), others described *kinetic organizations* (Fradette & Michaud, 1998), the *boundaryless organization* (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995), or the *flexible firm* (Volberda, 1998). Also, scholars relying on complexity theory depicted organizations as complex adaptive systems (CAS). They have emphasized the importance of organizational flexibility and adaptivity in order to cope with the complexity and dynamics of the organizational environment for a long time (e.g., Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Galbraith, 1973; Pascale, Millemann, & Gojja, 2000; Scott, 2001).

The concept of agility in business research and computer science

The more specific concept and term of agility gained wider attention in the 1990s through a report titled, *21st Century Manufacturing Enterprise Strategy Report* (Nagel, 1992), by the Iacocca Institute at Lehigh University, Pennsylvania. The project was financed by the

U.S. Department of Defense and brought together senior managers of important U.S. firms. They discussed the conditions under which corporations would be operating in the future and the management principles that should be adopted. Agile manufacturing was considered the key factor to success in a complex and changing world. Although the term agility had been used before, it especially gained momentum after the release of the so-called *Lehigh Report*. The term was then adopted by researchers in the fields of production and supply chain management, production economics, software development, and information technology.

In the software industry and computer science (where agility is still most commonly applied) widespread awareness originated from the release of the *Agile Manifesto* in 2001 by a group of 17 practitioners who sought to establish a better way of developing software (Beck et al., 2001). The manifesto promotes a core philosophy based on the importance of individuals and interactions, the incremental delivery of working software, collaboration with customers, and responding to changes. Soon a variety of specific methods gained attention that operationalize agile philosophy, such as Design Thinking, Scrum, or Kanban. These methods prescribe specific practices, such as cross-functional teams, sprints, daily stand-up meetings, iterative processes, retrospective project evaluation, etc. (Maximini, 2015; Plattner, Meinel, & Leifer, 2018).

However, agility or agile – the terms are frequently used synonymously – are broad constructs that encompass a multitude of concepts, methods, and tools. There exists a plethora of definitions and conceptualizations of agility (for overviews see e.g., Bernades & Hanna, 2008; Vázquez-Bustelo, Avella, & Fernández, 2007; Wendler, 2013). According to Gupta and Mittal (1996), agility is a business concept that integrates organizations, people and technology into a meaningful unit by deploying advanced information technologies and flexible and nimble organization structures to support highly skilled, knowledgeable, and motivated people. Vázquez-Bustelo et al. (2007) associate agility with a firm's ability to survive and prosper in a

competitive environment that changes constantly and unpredictably (p. 1314). According to Yusuf, Sarhadi, and Gunasekaran (1999), agility is:

the successful exploration of competitive bases (speed, flexibility, innovation, proactivity, quality, and profitability) through the integration of reconfigurable resources and best practices in a knowledge-rich environment to provide customer-driven products and services in a fast-changing market environment. (p. 37)

Sherehiy et al. (2007) identified the global characteristics of agility that can be applied to all aspects of the enterprise: flexibility, responsiveness, speed, culture of change, integration, low complexity, high-quality and customized products, and mobilization of core competencies.

Taken together, these conceptualizations provide the foundation for the following definition of agility that guided this analysis:

Agility is the overall capability of an organization to respond to and take advantage of the changes initiated by the drivers in the internal and external environment. It includes the ability to identify relevant changes and to respond proactively, efficiently, and effectively, employing the right personnel based on competence, not hierarchical status. Additionally, it includes the ability to implement flexible structures and processes suited to the immediate tasks at hand and to employ the appropriate resources in the shortest possible time.

In order to operationalize agility and point towards concrete ways to turn an organization more agile, the concept of agility is often broken down into six categories (Zerfass et al. 2018; Kienbaum 2018; Aghina et al. 2017). These can be roughly clustered into three areas that are not always selective, but cover the main dimensions, as illustrated in Figure 1.

1. *Structures and 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. 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 and People:* Agile organizations come to life by the people working within. Creating a different mindset and corporate culture are probably the most important facilitators 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 and Technology:* A number of agile methods or 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 (Zerfass et al., 2018, p.10).

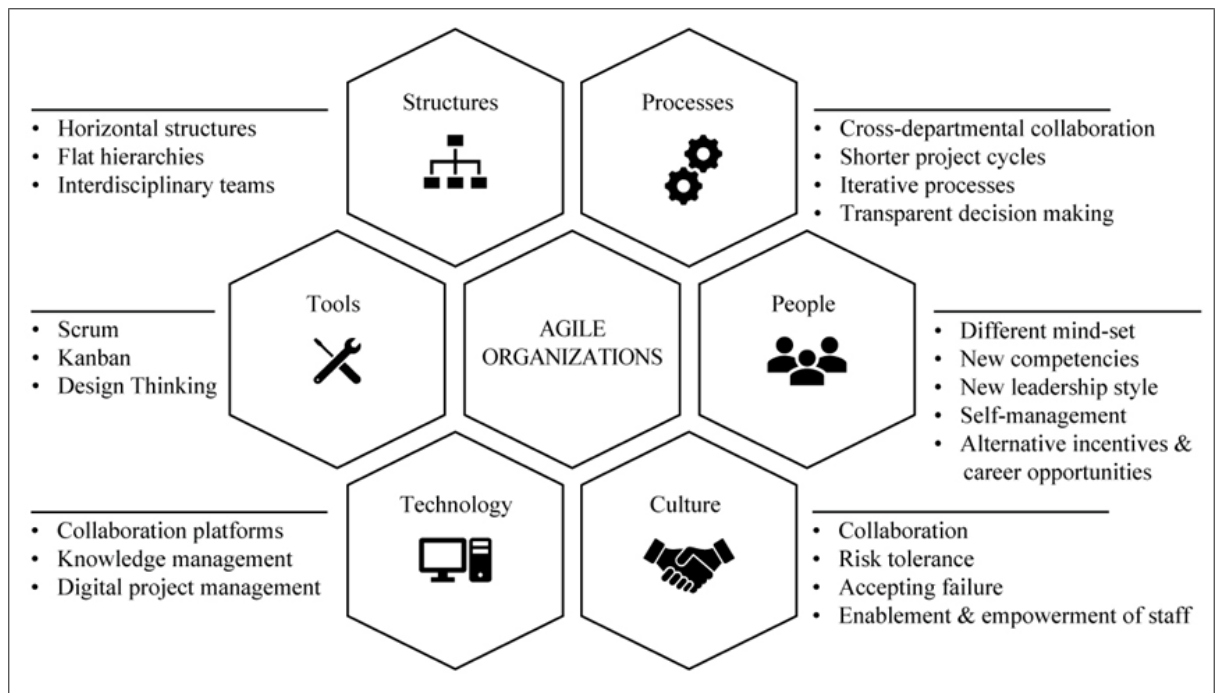


Figure 1: Relevant dimensions of agile organizations and departments (Zerfass et al., 2018, p. 11; slightly modified).

The concept of agility in corporate communications research

Despite its omnipresence in other fields concerned with organizational management, the concept of agility is nearly absent in the fields of public relations, corporate communications, and strategic communication research. When using the search term *agil**, the database *Communication & Mass Media Complete* produces only one hit explicitly related to communication management—a contribution by van Ruler (2015), in which she presents the reflective communication scrum as an agile method for campaign planning. In addition, van Ruler and Körver (2018) proposed an agile communication strategy framework that might replace the traditional and linear logic of research, action plan, communication, and evaluation (RACE).

However, there are earlier approaches to public relations based on systems theory, contingency theory, and complexity theory that capture some aspects of agility. Cutlip and Center

were the first who proposed an approach to public relations in 1952 that was grounded in systems theory and cybernetics. They described public relations as a cybernetic, open system that observes and monitors the external environment on behalf of the organization and helps it to adjust to necessary changes (Cutlip & Center, 1952). Three decades later, Long and Hazelton (1987) proposed a clear and simple definition of public relations based on contingency and systems theory: “Public relations is a communication function of management through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving organizational goals” (p. 6). The Public Relations Process Model they proposed, albeit rather simple, captures basic elements also found in the agility models and frameworks.

A number of public relations scholars inspired by contingency theory point towards the role of public relations as a boundary spanning function. Everett (2001), for instance, stresses that,

Public Relations tracks environmental changes by monitoring the operational environment. Based on the information from environmental tracking, public relations develops internal and external change programs to optimize the adaptive state between the organization and its environment. Public Relations programs increase the number and quality of linkages between the organization and its environment by identifying, building, and maintaining relationships with significant environmental elements. (p. 315)

Thus, public relations builds a “key operational bridge between environmental monitoring and the development of change programs that increase the probability of organizational survival” (Everett, 2001, p. 315). Similar perspectives are proposed by Lauzen and Dozier (1994), Dougall (2005), and Gilpin and Murphy (2006). Moreover, a number of authors elaborate on public relations and its link to complexity theory and the implications that a complex

and dynamic environment has for the communication function (e.g., Gilpin & Murphy, 2006; Murphy, 1996, 2000; Nothhaft & Wehmeier, 2007; Seeger, 2002).

While there were several peaks in scholarly interest with the role of public relations or communication management in helping an organization to deal with its external and internal complexity, the last decade has not seen further elaboration of these approaches. This comes as a surprise, considering the increase in complexity and volatility at all levels of the external and internal environment of organizations – and the increasing emphasis put on communication managers to deal with these challenges. Therefore, this study offers a new attempt to address the topic of environmental complexity in communication management by examining it through the lens of agility research.

General frameworks and models of agility

A plethora of models and frameworks addressing agility exists in disciplines outside of communication. A number of overview articles discuss these models and frameworks (e.g., Vázquez-Bustelo et al., 2007; Sherehiy et al., 2007; Wendler, 2013; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999; Zhang & Sharifi, 2000; Tseng & Lin, 2011). As the concept of agility mainly originates from the manufacturing and software domains, most of the frameworks were developed in this context. However, the present study concentrates on models and frameworks that describe agile organizations or agile enterprises (e.g., Yusuf et al., 1999; Vasquez-Bustelo et al., 2007; Sharifi & Zhang, 1999; Tseng & Lin, 2011). This helps to link those concepts to communication in organizations. Figures 2 and 3 exemplify two basic frameworks of organizational agility. Although the models and frameworks differ slightly in scope and means of application, they comprise a number of similar elements: drivers, capabilities, and providers/enablers of agility.

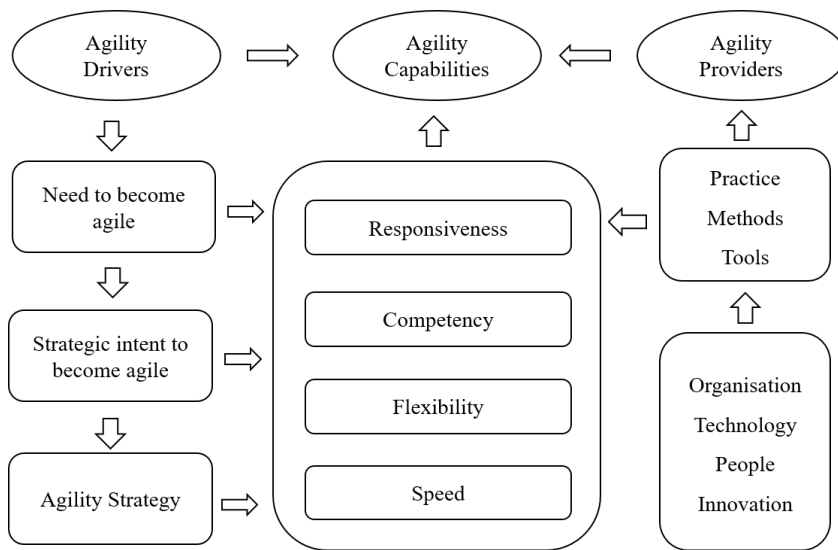


Figure 2: Conceptual model of agility (Source: Sharifi & Zhang, 1999, p. 11)

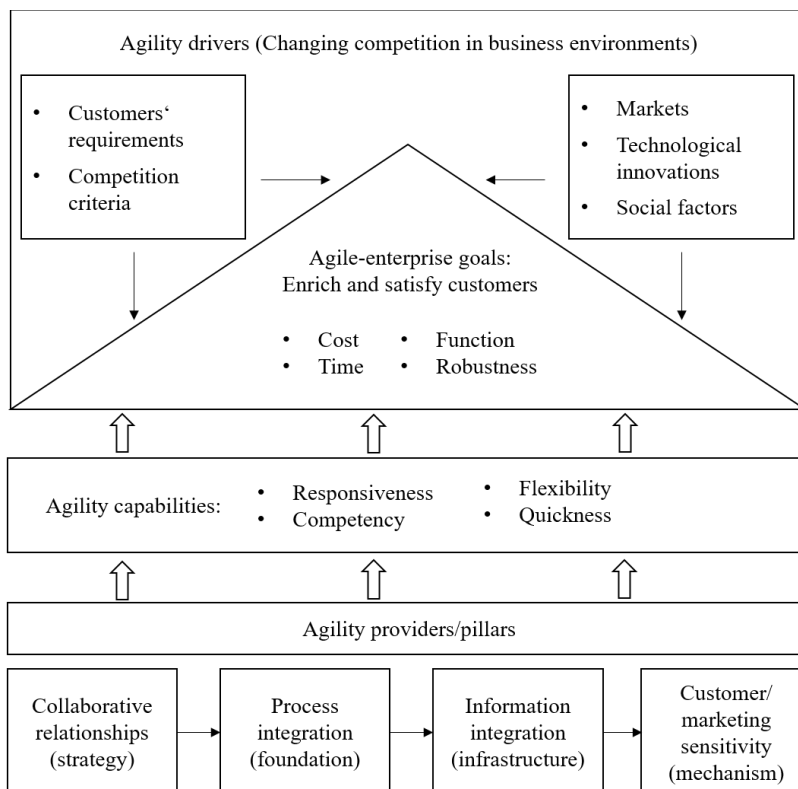


Figure 3: Conceptual model of an agile enterprise (Source: Tseng & Lin, 2011, p. 3698)

Agility drivers

Agility drivers refer to a set of external contextual elements within the business environment that influence organizations but fall outside management control. They represent a source of potential opportunities or threats (Vasquez-Bustelo et al., 2007, p. 1318). Agility drivers are described on different levels of abstraction that all refer to the fundamental challenge of change. Some authors refer to very broad and general drivers like turbulence, complexity, dynamism, or volatility. Others discuss quite specific drivers like new customer requirements, or technological innovations. The most commonly named agility drivers are *market volatility* caused by growth in the market niche, increasing the introduction of new products, and shortening product life; *intense competition* caused by rapidly changing markets, pressure from increasing costs, international competitiveness, Internet usage, and a short development time for new products; *changes in customer requirements* caused by demands for customization, increased expectations about quality, and a quicker delivery time; *accelerating technological changes* caused by the introduction of new and efficient production facilities and system integration; and *changes in social factors* caused by environmental protection, workforce/workplace expectations, and legal pressure (e.g., Tseng & Lin, 2011, p. 3697-3698).

Agility Capabilities

Agility capabilities are essential capabilities that an organization needs in order to positively respond to and take advantage of the changes initiated by the drivers in the external environment. Many authors (e.g., Dyer & Shafer, 2003; Tseng & Lin, 2011; Zhang & Sharifi, 2000) identify four principal capabilities. Those proposed by Tseng and Lin (2011) were adopted for this study:

(1) *Responsiveness*, the ability to see/identify changes, to respond quickly, reactively or proactively and to recover; (2) *Competency*,¹ the efficiency and effectiveness of an enterprise in reaching its goals; (3) *Flexibility/adaptability*, the ability to implement different processes and achieve different goals with the same facilities; and (4) *Quickness/speed*, the ability to culminate an activity in the shortest possible time (Tseng & Lin, 2011, p. 3698).

Agility providers / enablers

These are the means by which capabilities for agility can be obtained. Some authors use the term ‘enablers,’ while others speak of ‘providers,’ but both refer to the same—those key organizational factors that allow an organization to become more agile. Numerous studies have been conducted to identify agility providers, from which corporate leaders can select those which are appropriate for specific strategies, business processes, and information systems. The most commonly named agility enablers are human resource practices, external relations with suppliers, customers, and partners, internal coordination of staff, process management, and technology (e.g., Yusuf et al., 1999; Vázquez-Bustelo et al., 2007; Zhang & Sharifi, 2000).

Thus, agility can be conceptualized along the dimensions of drivers, capabilities, and providers/enablers. This has to be taken into account when moving forward towards a framework that depicts the contributions of communications in agile organizations.

Research questions

¹ While this capability highlights an important aspect, the present study avoids the term ‘competency’ and uses ‘performance’ instead. This will avoid misinterpretation. In the discourse on corporate communications and public relations, ‘competency’ is linked to the knowledge, skills, and abilities of communication practitioners on the micro-level. In the debate on agility, however, competency stands for something different—the performance of an organization in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.

This study explores the impact of agility on corporate communications practice in today's organizations. The literature review revealed an omnipresence of agility-related research in many fields concerned with organizational management, but an absence of meaningful inquiry in the fields of public relations, corporate communications, and strategic communication research. Thus, due to the explorative nature of this study, a rather broad spectrum of research questions were examined to capture the diverse range of agility-related aspects relevant in communication departments at the moment. Specifically, this study explored the following research questions:

RQ1: How relevant is agility for corporations and what drivers, capabilities, and providers are associated with agility in strategic communication?

RQ2: How can communication departments support an organization in becoming more agile?

RQ3: What can be done to make communication departments more agile?

Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen, as no previous insights or data were available. A series of semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted (Edwards & Holland, 2013; Oltmann, 2016) with chief communication officers (CCO) and senior communication managers from 38 multinational companies with headquarters or large overseas branches in Germany between January and March 2018. Interviewing large companies operating in multiple markets ensured that business dynamics, as well as hypermodernity in society identified by previous research (Loebbecke & Picot, 2015; Verhoeven et al., 2018), were prevalent in the sample. At the same time, focusing on one country in Europe ensured that the exploration of the novel topic was not spoiled by language barriers or different overall management cultures.

The companies included in the sample came from diverse industries (e.g., manufacturing, automotive, insurance, financial, healthcare, and pharma) and together represent more than three million employees. They were grouped into three categories: medium-sized companies (< 5 billion € annual revenue), large-sized companies (5-20 billion € annual revenue) and very large-sized companies (> 20 billion € annual revenue). Thirteen of the interviewees worked for medium companies, nine for large companies, and 16 for very large companies. The interviewees were selected for their high professional status and expertise, their longtime experience in corporate communications, their strategic view on the topic, and their proximity to top management. The sample is not representative of the status quo of communication management practice in general—agility is, at the moment, an ‘elite discourse’ in corporate communications with only large and very small (start-up) enterprises being affected. This contradiction is explained by the fact that very small companies can afford to be agile due to their smallness and large companies cannot afford not to be agile – in one way or another – due to their large size.

Ten of the interviewees were women, and 28 were men. Some interviews were conducted with more than one person when the CCO brought a colleague from his or her department or other departments (usually Human Relations or Strategy). Except two interviews that were conducted in person, the interviews were conducted via telephone. The interviews had an average length of 40 minutes, with the longest lasting 85 minutes and the shortest 12 minutes. The interviews were organized in three main parts, but were still openly structured in order to allow room for other aspects relevant to the interviewees. Each interview opened with a question on the relevance of agility in the company, in general, and the interpretation of the term ‘agility.’ Afterwards, the interviewees were asked about the status quo of different aspects of agility (strategy, structure, culture, instruments, tools, and people) in their company, in general, and their communication department, specifically .

All interviews were transcribed and then transferred into a software program supporting qualitative content analysis (MAXQDA). Then a comprehensive process of data coding and identification of concepts and themes was conducted. By following a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), patterns, themes, and categories deriving from the data were identified and compared with those found in the literature. Due to the explorative nature of the interviews and the lack of literature and existing data on the topic, the data analysis roughly followed the prescriptions for grounded-theory building as proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Glaser (1992).

Coding, analysis, and framework construction were based on a back and forth approach between extracting strategies, agility drivers, capabilities, and enablers/providers from the data, as well as comparing and conceptualizing these based on the literature review. The purpose was to build on existing concepts, models, and frameworks of organizational agility research in order to integrate our own framework into these approaches – depicting the role communication management plays in this regard. While the coding system was initially very open and inclusive, the investigators were later able – without forcing it – to synthesize codes into categories that fit well with those identified in the literature. In the final stage of the analysis, the various conceptual elements identified in the data were compiled into a coherent framework explaining the triple role of corporate communications in relation to organizational agility.

Findings

In the interviews, many communication leaders could not clearly differentiate between their contribution to organizational agility and the agility of their communication department. Thus,

some findings could be attributed to more than one research questions. Nevertheless, interviewee responses were collated as precisely as possible and are report here in the order consistent with the research questions.

How relevant is agility for corporations and what drivers, capabilities, and providers are associated with agility? (RQ1)

Overall, agility and the elements associated with it were, with few exceptions, highly relevant to all respondents. Everyone was familiar with the term and its core dimensions, although many companies avoid it because of some negative connotations. Often alternative terms, like flexibility, are preferred. Agility as a concept is often part of a larger organizational change program associated with digitalization and the digital transformation. Many companies are already engaged in or are currently implementing a corporate-wide cultural-change program that puts agility providers—such as flat hierarchies, lateral structures, and enabling and empowerment of staff—in the forefront. Twenty of the 38 interviewees confirmed that agility was a core element of their recent corporate change program. Mostly, corporate communications and human relations departments are in charge of these programs.

The interviewees confirmed that the turn towards corporate agility is usually triggered by changes in a company's *external environment*. When asked for what drives agility, almost all companies named the *digital transformation* to be the most important external driver. Digital technologies transform all parts of the value chain. Accelerated and altered development cycles for new products and technologies require many organizations in our sample to become more flexible and faster. Besides technological shifts, *market demands* were named as another important driver. Rapidly changing markets, increasing cost pressure, and intensified international competition require corporations to adapt their market portfolios. Furthermore, the expectations of customers regarding customization, quality, and delivery times are rising. This intensifies

the pressure on corporations to meet individual needs instead of mass production. New competitors, some of them start-ups and entrepreneurs, are often smaller and faster. Last but not least, investors demand growth and financial success, which often leads to acquisitions and subsequent need for restructuring. Overall, the inductive content analysis of the interviews confirmed the external agility drivers found in the literature.

On the other hand, several *internal factors* are decisive for supporting or impeding the transformation towards agility, too. Most important to the companies in our sample was the role of the *top management*. An executive board will only amend the corporate strategy and the organizational set-up if it believes in the advantages of agile structures. This can stimulate radical changes in organizational design or corporate culture. The CCOs of one of the world's biggest retail e-commerce companies explained that,

In our company, cultural change would not have been possible without the absolute commitment of the board. The change process started when the board realized it had to change itself and its mode of communication and cooperation. However, at some point this top-down process has to change into a bottom-up process. It is important for the board to allow for areas of freedom and development that employees can fill out and design individually.²

Vice versa, the lack of support was recognized as one of the largest impellers of organizational transformation. The experience of the interviewees was that it is very difficult to establish agile structures and processes without the support of top executives.

Another factor we found to be decisive was the *size of the organization*. It is easier for smaller organizations to implement agile ways of working. At the same time, many very large corporations rethink their current traditional organizational set-up and processes. They are the ones that

² All interviews were conducted in German. Quotes were translated from German to English by the authors.

feel the growing competition from smaller and more flexible suppliers the most. So far, medium-sized companies are the least concerned with agile restructuring. Finally, not all *types of businesses or tasks* within an organization are suitable for agile working. Activities such as accounting, investor relations or handling legal issues work better with clear chains of command and responsibility. When it comes to *capabilities*, here, too, the interviewees confirmed those derived from the literature: performance, flexibility/adaptability, responsiveness, and quickness/speed.

How can communication departments support a company in becoming more agile? (RQ2)

Despite recognizing the importance of supporting agile capabilities, many interviewees felt that these were rather abstract categories and paroles proclaimed by the board that were hard to operationalize in practice. Many wondered how exactly communication departments can contribute and help their organization in these categories. Oftentimes, the agile capabilities were the conceptual foundations of cultural change programs, although it differed from company to company in how far these abstract goals were translated into actual measures. Corporate communications is – at the moment – often left at communication *about* these goals instead of being actively involved in realizing them. Most of the communication leaders interviewed were aware of the fact that experimenting with agility providers is not an end in itself, but that ultimately these actions have to contribute to overall organizational agility and thus enhance agility capabilities for the corporation at large. For now, however, the link has not been established. On the contrary, some CCOs felt that there were too few people really questioning the ultimate value of their efforts and measures surrounding the agile transformation. They complained that because agility is such a dominant management fashion at the moment, no one dares to ask critical questions about its ultimate value.

What can be done to make communication departments more agile? (RQ3)

The findings of this research suggest that transforming their own department is the most pressing strategic issue for any CCO at the moment. Therefore, the analysis focused on RQ3. The results indicate that the dimensions of change mentioned by the interviewees corresponded with the six agility dimensions found in the literature (see Figure 1). Thus, the findings were structured accordingly.

Aligning structures and processes

Aligning structures and processes is one of the main challenges in order to make communication departments more agile. Agility is oftentimes a means to cope, not only with the increasing speed of communication, but also with the limited resources of the department. A leading communication manager of a multinational chemical company said, “We all have our headcount targets, but there are more and more tasks and channels communications has to address.” Thus, the question of how to deploy the people at hand most efficiently, effectively, but also with the most flexibility, is important today. A crucial factor in this regard is organizational design. Intra-organizational cooperation usually improves when lateral structures are in place that enable people to work together across departmental structures and across hierarchies. Thus, many of the communication departments in our sample started to restructure, create flat hierarchies, abandon old silos, and open up to interdisciplinary collaboration with other departments. The scope to which the organizations interviewed engaged in a redesign of structures and processes differed greatly from company to company.

Three types of companies could be identified within the sample: (a) those that do not address agility at all (mostly smaller, rather traditional companies that have not yet been hit by the digital transformation or have not yet seen the need for change); (b) those that create ‘islands of agility’ within project structures, innovation hubs, subsidiaries, etc.; and (c) those that make more radical changes towards agility at the structural level (restructuring of organizational or

departmental design, reduction of hierarchical levels, merging of sub-departments, etc.) and really engage in corporate change.

The first important factor influencing the style that was adopted was the overall size of the company and the size of the communication department. Very large companies in the sample (> 20 billion € annual revenue) usually had communication departments staffed with 100 to 150 people. These companies – and their communication departments – stuck to creating ‘islands of agility.’ This means that they either dabbled with agile ways of working in substructures like innovation hubs, or they tried out agile elements in project structures with cross-functional teams. Those very large companies were most often dedicated to a sophisticated, corporate-wide change program. Ironically, in these organizations, the introduction of agile ways of working was oftentimes initially driven by grass-roots initiatives. These were mostly small groups of managers or coworkers that were dissatisfied with the perceived ineffectiveness of the waterfall technique mostly used in large change programs.

The second important factor determining the type of agility integration was top-management support for agile initiatives. Although agile projects grew out of individual or small group initiatives in most companies, its long-term success or structural implications could only be realized by executive orders. In those companies that took the most radical approach in terms of complete organizational redesign of the whole firm, the policy was prescribed by the board of executives. These companies usually also hired external support in the form of change consulting firms.

The majority of communication departments are cautious when adopting elements of agility. They are selecting only those elements and techniques that are perceived to be most valuable. Many adapt a hybrid approach; they still use vertical ways of organizing but complement them with agile approaches. Standard operations and daily business tasks are often addressed in the traditional manner, while special corporate-wide projects often appear to be more

agile, not necessarily by employing agile tools, but more by introducing different ways of leadership (competence beats hierarchy), cross-functional teams, as well as flexible and dynamic approaches towards organizing and evaluating work. At the moment, many companies rely on ‘trial-and-error,’ amending their practices on a project-by-project basis, and constantly experimenting with new ways of organizing work.

When asked about crucial aspects of agile structures, an internal communications executive from a multinational automobile manufacturer mentioned the reluctance of executives to release their best people into agile structures like ‘swarm organizations,’ innovation hubs, or start-ups:

That is the crucial difference between a project organization and a swarm: That you have to release people a hundred percent into the organization. In the beginning, executives usually are positively disposed towards that. But when they understand that one person is gone and they cannot access his or her skills and expertise anymore, conflicts arise.

So, the effectiveness of agile structures depends on the willingness of executives and staff to make them come alive and to also make some concessions and sacrifices in this process.

Aligning culture and people

People management proved to be the most important aspect in all of the interviews. These turned the spotlight on an aspect of agility that was mostly ignored by the literature and absent in the agility models: the importance of people – both managers and staff. The CCOs found that especially younger employees belonging to the generations Y and Z have different expectations for their career than previous generations. They want to take on responsibility for their own projects very soon and prefer to work in teams. For many of them, taking leadership positions is no longer a top priority. Flexible working structures, which are common in agile

organizations, fit their expectations better than hierarchical set-ups. That is why most companies put strong emphasis on (executive) trainings and a cultural change program to address the mindset and motivation of employees.

Agile organizations need a different corporate culture than those based on traditional forms of organizing. They also demand a different kind of workforce. The CCO of a very large multinational industrial conglomerate distinguished between three agile competencies—‘agile mind,’ ‘agile hand,’ and ‘agile feet’—, stating:

The abilities required to shape transformation processes are completely different from those needed for writing press releases. As communicators we need to be open to new tasks, have the capability to manage and engage at interfaces and be compatible with other functions – all this needs an agile mind, a mind that has to engage in lifelong learning. ... I cannot rely on the task I was hired to do. I have to describe my own task and have to build a team able to address this task. Such a team will probably be a mixture of people from my own department and people from other areas of the firm. Maybe I have to lead the team, maybe I will have to find somebody else to lead it, either way – I have to reach my objective and targets. Communication people have to be networkers, literally knitting a net – a team – with their hands. ... The external challenges put on the organization demand flexibility or agility. That means that you have to be in good shape to be able to respond.

Working in interdisciplinary project teams is a challenge. Many interviewees confirmed that these projects do not always run smoothly. It is a learning curve for both sides. Communicators have to understand the processes, products, and ways of working in other departments and business units. They have to refrain from acting as a corporate unit with governance power. Likewise, other business units have to understand the merits of communication professionals and accept them as valuable peers. In order for different departments or organizational units to

be willing to share information and collaborate with corporate communications, co-workers have to trust in the reliability, competence and professionalism of communicators. Therefore, corporate communication departments should work towards creating a positive internal reputation. Only then will other units value the department and its staff as important partners. Reputation, trust, and a track record of good services will be more relevant in today's organizations than set rules of communication governance. Thus, one CCO stressed the importance of backing his own people:

The most important thing when working with others is supporting the colleagues. Because there are many people in large companies who do not like to collaborate and do not accept advice or decisions from someone with a lower hierarchical status. Here the superiors are asked to weight in and support.

In addition, the CCO of a large bank stated:

There are two challenges. First, executives do not know what their people can do, and, second, in new projects they are inclined to say 'I don't have the right people – I have to hire.' But that is not the right way. Personnel development is our strategic topic: a) executives have to cut their people loose, send them into the corporation, let them try new things; b) colleagues of every age have to get the chance of development and enablement.

According to the interviews, a key challenge for leadership is making people want to work in agile organizations. Empowerment and enablement have their downsides, too. First of all, people in agile environments work more, seldom less. As long as agility is oftentimes treated as an 'add-on' to standard procedures and tasks, employees who want (or have to) engage in agile projects have to add extra hours to their schedule. Thus, executives need to give their staff some form of incentives – and that cannot only be money. As one CCO puts it:

Incentives are in the end appreciation, fun, and a great product. It is not about free time, or money or target agreements. Target agreements do not work in project organizations. You have to provide space for individual growth and learning, for ‘out-of-the-box-thinking’ and anti-hierarchical behavior.

Of course, it is naïve to think that all employees are intrinsically motivated. Many like working in linear, vertical structures. In fact, some interviewees stated that it is sometimes the younger, more ambitious staff that finds agile structures problematic. While more senior staff might appreciate a new challenge, young people hoping for a well-planned corporate career might be disappointed seeing that many hierarchical levels – and thus stepping stones for their career – are demolished.

A communications executive from a large automobile manufacturer said that he hired a colleague from a large telecommunications company that had abandoned all leadership positions except one. So it got really difficult for people to make a career, he said:

If there is no structure left, then people cannot get the appreciation and development possibilities they need. So they leave. We do not want that to happen in our company.

Another CCO from the financial sector commented:

We come from a time when content-related knowledge was related to power, when people did not like to share it because they did not want to lose their power advantages. ... Of course, everyone wants more information and transparency, but when things get concrete and people shall share their own stuff, then it gets complicated. This is a leadership challenge.

And not every employee fully understands at first sight that empowerment and self-organization also means being held accountable. The CCO of a company in the aviation industry found that:

When employees say they want freedom and responsibility it is a nice choice of words, but you have to cope with that. There sometimes is a dissent between what employees really want, because responsibility has consequences: you are being held accountable. ... I am a big fan of the situational leadership approach. Some people flourish with freedom and responsibility and some break – you have to know who is who.

The data from the interviews showed that motivating employees for agile work seems to be a tightrope act. Leaders have to address each employee individually: Can he or she cope with agility and in what way? What do incentives look like? Which employee is motivated by what? Which employee is suited for which tasks and how can I promote him/her? What kind of training do people need?

Implementing agile tools and practices

Agile practices such as Scrum, Kanban, Design Thinking, Sprints, etc., usually are the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about agility. However, the interviews revealed that they are the least important factor for communication leaders. As mentioned above, there was one smaller communication department that employs agile tools in all processes, but in the rest of our sample agile practices were only used at a broader scale in sub-departmental structures or in specific projects, workshops, etc. Many companies relied on a mix of experienced and specifically trained staff and external coaches to apply these techniques. More important was the use of digital tools that support departmental or organizational agility. All companies used some kind of (social) collaboration platform that allows organizational members to share

knowledge and information. With the growing importance of cross-functional teamwork, collaboration, and project management, software such as Jira, VersionOne, Flag, or Skype for Business is increasingly used to monitor and manage corporate-wide teams.

An upcoming challenge mentioned by a couple of interviewees will be the integration of software and platforms, something that will be done together with human resources management. Thus, agile projects can be better integrated into overall structures and processes of human relations. For example, salaries and incentives need to be adopted flexibly to the current workload and responsibility of coworkers.

Limits of Agility

This empirical study also showed that agility does not fit everyone and every situation. In this sample, there were a number of very large and quite traditional companies that will probably never be truly agile. Even in many smaller companies, there are functions and processes that have to be hierarchically and systematically structured. For instance, one interviewee from a multinational chemical company points towards the importance of clear chains of command in high-risk areas – which are many in the chemical industry. The CCO from a bank estimates that, in the end, 70 to 80 percent of his department could work agile. He believes that there are certain areas within corporate communications that are less prone to agility, for instance, investor relations, compliance and litigation communication, and risk/crisis communication. When facts must be 100 percent correct and missteps can have significant consequences, it is not the right place for agility, but rather top-down management and one-voice-policy is the more effective approach.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study is to depict the role of communications in agile organizations and to link the interdisciplinary research on agility to the field of strategic communication. When examining the general role of corporate communications in organizations, the findings of this study are in line with Nothhaft (2010), who pointed out that communications can be conceptualized as a *second-order management function* with the goal of influencing the management of others. Second-order management has the function to “institutionalize certain concerns in an organization,” concerns that are “inseparably bound up with everyday management decisions as well as corporate strategy” (p. 133). Organizational agility can be conceptualized as such a concern. As discussed above, the imperative of becoming more agile affects all dimensions of management processes at any level of a corporation. Communications acts as one of the key corporate-wide supporters of this challenge – for instance, by planning and implementing cultural change programs, by organizing leadership programs to foster new ways of collaborating and communicating, by conveying the importance of becoming more agile to all employees and stakeholders, by engaging in interdisciplinary projects with partners from all parts of the organization, etc. In this way, communication departments and professionals are able to influence the overall processes of corporate management with the final aim to enhance organizational agility.

At the same time, however, *communications acts as a first-order management function*, focusing on managing the communication department and its communication activities (messaging and listening). Communications – like every other function or unit within a company – is driven by agility in two ways. First, it has to respond to changes enforced by drivers from the external environment, e.g., by demands from journalists, social media influencers, or other stakeholders. Second, communications has to adopt to top-down orders from the board that demand a turn towards agile structures, processes, and culture. As we learned from the inter-

views, enhancing the agility of their own department is the foremost challenge of most communication leaders in our sample. However, while they appeared rather confident in their role as second-order managers due to their familiarity with corporate change projects, the responsibility of fundamentally changing their own approaches towards managing their communication department provided more of a challenge for many interviewees.

This is especially true when it comes to enhancing leadership and *workforce agility* (Crocitto & Youssef, 2003; Muduli, 2013; Martin, 2015; Hopp & Oyen, 2010; Petersson & Mannix, 2003). Agility demands a new understanding of leadership, less anchored in hierarchies, departmental power structures, or personal influence, but based on project or team leadership with the aim to enable and empower employees to make their own decisions. Today, employees and middle management, too, increasingly claim more flexibility, freedom, self-organization, and empowerment (Bergmann, 2014). This, however, puts high demands on the competencies, skills, and attitudes of employees. Not every team member wants to engage in agile ways of working and welcomes these changes. Usually, more experienced people find it harder to adopt (Peterson & Mannix, 2003; Schloegel et al. 2018). Adopting structures, processes and culture to allow – but also to demand – people to work in more agile ways is a crucial leadership challenge for communication leaders today. Many have only just begun to reflect on this. This challenge has implications for leadership culture, hiring, competence management and training, incentives, and promotion. It is a task that, due to the interconnected nature of agility, communications cannot address alone, but it has to be addressed at the corporate level.

Based on this line of reasoning, a framework was developed (shown in Figure 4) that visualizes the role of communications in agility, including its internal and external drivers. Overall, there are three main tasks for communication departments in the context of agility:

- 1) *Communication*: A core task of corporate communications is to inform internal and external stakeholders about major changes in the strategy and organizational design. It is

important to explain the necessity, show roadmaps, create positive images, and stimulate support. This task is not new or restricted to change projects aimed at agility. But this research shows that communication departments are nearly always involved when large change programs linked to digital transformation are initiated. Sometimes they are even in the lead. And oftentimes they work closely with human resources. Conveying the spirit of agility and enhancing corporate reputation can help to improve internal appreciation of the communication department. Apart from the change process, it must be noted that agile organizations put a strong 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 by advising about implementing agile structures, processes, and tools. Our research reveals that communication departments often act as pilots that are among the first units that experiment with agile work. Communication professionals act as coaches and advisors when it comes to agility. This 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 is confronted with the challenge to employ its staff in more flexible ways, to achieve a growing number of tasks with the same resources, to react faster to external and internal demands, and to

make processes more efficient. This requires a different culture of collaboration and a new mindset for everyone.

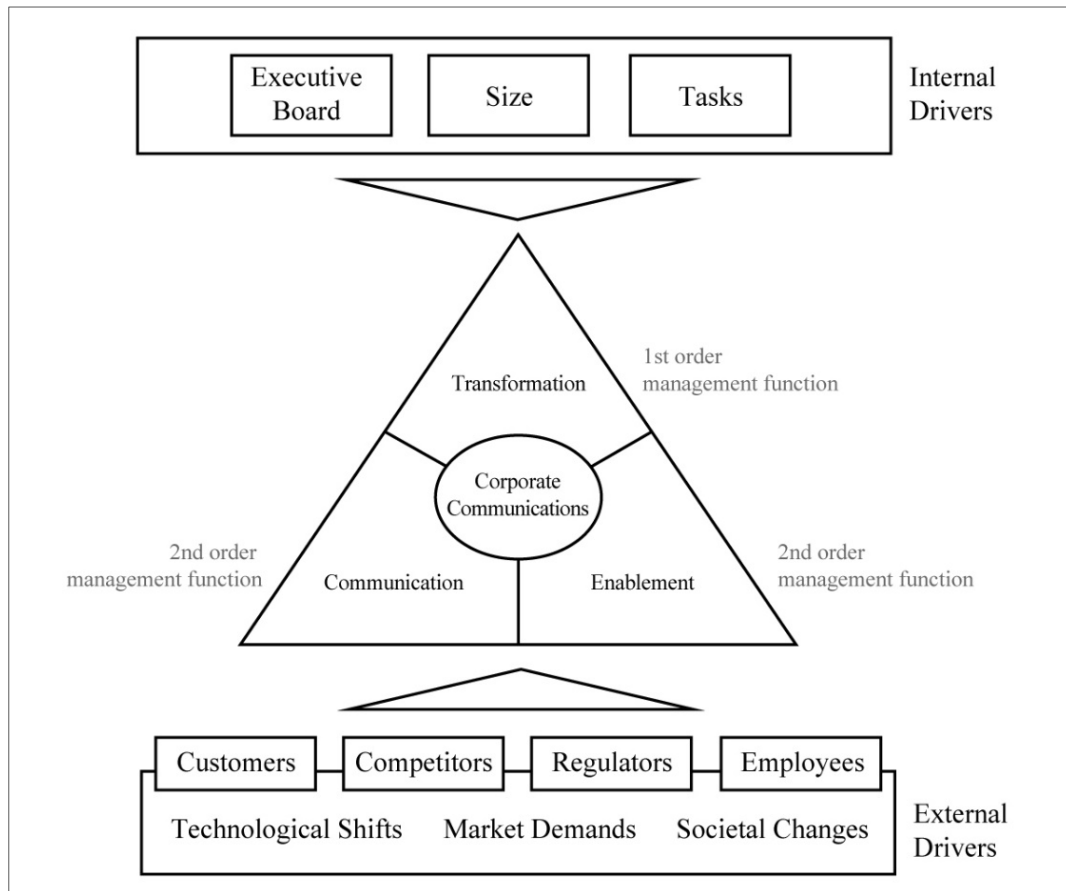


Figure 4: The triple role of communication departments in agile organizations.

Conclusions and Future Research

Agility is both a challenge and a chance for communication managers. It beats hierarchies and intricacies, but at the same time creates complexities and new problems of its own. In agile organizations, everything is connected. You cannot turn one screw without affecting a number of others:

Organizations are Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), whether they were designed that way or not. It is one major differentiator of agile organizations that

its members understand and manage the organization as such, rather than treating it as if it were a steam machine driven by pressure and mechanic reactions.

(Arell, n.d.)

A big advantage of agility is the interconnectedness it enhances – which is a pitfall, too. Structures, processes, culture, people, and practices have to be combined in a coherent manner, across the communication department and across the whole organization. This study revealed that agility is not just a passing fashion. It is likely to stay because of its superior speed and flexibility in comparison to alternative ways of approaching the challenges of dynamic organizations.

However, agility is definitely a phenomenon with multifaceted implications depending on the organization. The majority of interviewees were probably correct in being cautious in implementing agile structures, processes, and practices. On the other hand, a problem with creating ‘islands of agility’ as a test run is just that: they are islands. Software developers who have implemented agile routines often complain that business units are unable to react to the increased speed they demand, and that they fail to turn fast development cycles into business value and sustainable competitive advantage (Arell, n.d.). Similarly, creating islands of agility within communication departments might result in frictions with other units and – at best – to a suboptimal utilization of communicative assets.

Agility demands a fundamental change of people’s mindsets. It is no longer ‘us in here and them out there.’ There is no room for traditional turf wars between communications and marketing departments or professionals working in corporate headquarters and colleagues communicating in business units and country branches. In fact, collaboration and interconnectedness means more than colored post-it notes on a wall or a fancy new office space. It is hard work. And it means letting go and taking a leap of faith. As one CCO in the interviews puts it:

“It is a process – iterative and erratic – and you have to accept that.” Communications cannot do this alone. It can provide infrastructure and guidelines, maybe even act as an example for others, but its true contribution of value lies in enabling all parts of the organization to become more agile.

As for future research, obviously, this study could offer nothing but a glimpse into this multi-faceted topic. There are multiple avenues that need to be explored. The central topic that most interviewees pointed to was the importance of ‘workforce agility.’ As our sample was focused on CCOs, the present study is rather one-sided. Future studies should research employees – both middle management and other staff – and explore their attitudes towards agile ways of working and their experiences with it. Another topic that requires more elaboration is the challenge of leadership in agile organizations. How will leadership change when it is no longer rooted in hierarchical structures, formal status, and supported by long-term experiences? Do approaches like ‘leadership by competence’ really work, or are many of those asked to lead agile teams overwhelmed, because they lack the necessary leadership skills? In addition, how does agile leadership work in other cultures? Some of the interviewees already pointed towards the challenge of implementing more agile corporate cultures in Asian subsidiaries with a complete different set of cultural and business norms and values.

These questions are deeply entwined with those currently addressed by human resources (HR) management. Most interviewees stressed the strong link between communication and HR in all challenges associated with agility – implementing corporate/cultural change programs, leadership training, as well as core aspects of HR management (e.g., flexible working hours, flexible payment schemes, new incentives, high-potential development, etc.). The overlap of issues opens up various avenues for interdisciplinary research programs.

Another field that might be addressed in future research is communication measurement and controlling in dynamic organizations (Dühring & Linke, 2012; Macnamara, 2018). Becoming more agile has implications for all elements of the management process, including evaluation and performance management. The interconnected, entwined nature of agile projects and processes as well as the demanded flexibility, responsiveness, and speed of working, tend to make traditional approaches of controlling more difficult. In some cases they might even be useless.

Agility, a big idea discussed in many disciplines, has multiple implications for the theory and practice of strategic communications. This study shows that exploring it in more detail will enrich the body of knowledge of corporate communications and related disciplines.

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