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ACCELERATING INNOVATION

Networks for Agility

Collaborative Practices Critical to Agile Transformation

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Introduction

Agile teams are sweeping through the corporate landscape. Three-quarters of companies in a recent McKinsey survey reported that becoming more agile is one of their top three concerns.¹ Established as an approach to help software development teams achieve their objectives through short project timeframes, clear targets, and sprints, agile is now being rolled out to much larger groups and even whole organizations. While companies transition to agile in many ways, those attempting to replicate and scale practices from software development often falter because they ignore the collaborative demands of designing and implementing agile initiatives in today's network-centric organizations.

The concept of agile is seductive. We consistently hear senior leaders use metaphors that work well for isolated project teams—analogs of Speed Boats, SEAL teams, and Scrums abound as these leaders look for innovative ways to get work done in today's complex world. Unfortunately, these analogies cause damage when they blind leaders to collaborative enablers of success, resulting in teams isolated from their organization. The problems are similar to those faced by “self-managed teams”—a concept that sizzled into fashion in the 1990s, fueled by consultants and academics, then lost ground as ineffective and unsustainable. Why? Many teams lacked an understanding of the context for their work because they had neither inputs from subject-matter experts nor ongoing access to senior leaders to keep their efforts aligned with organizational strategy. Those operating in a more traditional, hierarchical culture often got rejected by the organization because they lacked connections to the users or recipients of their work. Proponents did not see that influential colleagues with a not-invented-here mentality could stamp out innovations coming from across organizational silos. To be effective, today's agile teams must be understood in the context of networks critical to their success.

In this paper, we lay out four practices that are essential for organizations' successful agile transformation:

- 1 **Select agile teams based on human *and* social capital.**
- 2 **Proactively manage connectivity with experts outside the team.**
- 3 **Manage team collaboration and energy/purpose as a network.**
- 4 **Simultaneously innovate work outcome and adopting network.**

Each section highlights the core issues and provides some practical steps for addressing them. By recognizing agile teams as embedded in broader collaborative networks, organizations can prevent many of the missteps that result in disappointing or failed agile initiatives.

Collaborative Practices Critical to Agile Transformation

Not recognizing agile teams as embedded in broader collaborative networks leads to failure—in the work product or its adoption, in the disruption of work flows from which agile team members are extracted, or, increasingly, in the burnout and departure of overloaded employees. Take one well-regarded financial institution that prudently conducted a pilot of agile with 12 strategic initiatives. “We definitely stacked the deck for success,” reflected one senior leader. “We pulled our best into the initiative, spent a lot of money teaching them agile methods, and gave them a lot of executive attention, so they knew this all mattered.” Overall, despite the struggle to find space for co-location of the agile teams, the initial results were promising, as the locally piloted initiatives were designed and tested in a very rapid timeframe.

The next step proved to be much more troublesome. Heartened by early successes, the executive team decided to double down on agile and scale the approach to a much broader population. Problems emerged almost immediately. People pulled onto the original agile teams—who had been quietly grumbling about non-stop meetings and unsustainable levels of email at night—became more vocal as colleagues outside of the teams continued to email and call with questions. Existing work was also suffering as these employees were not able to support prior work streams. “None of their requests were unreasonable. People needed to know things only I knew or get my help with specific relationships. And the reality was that at some point I would need their help; I couldn’t ignore them,” explained one agile team member. “The problem is that all this is invisible work. I honestly believe leaders don’t think it is happening, but it has bled into late evenings and constant weekend work.” Rollout of the initial 12 pilots was uneven at best, as not enough had been done to manage change and test feasibility of solutions in different geographies and markets. All came to a head when two blowups happened—one affecting a top ten account and the other when a high-profile agile solution was unilaterally rejected—that demanded the leaders take a new look at agile.

As part of their program review, leaders deployed an Organizational Network Analysis (ONA) to assess how collaboration and decision-making was occurring in the scale-up of agile. *The network analysis showed that staffing, prototype development, and pilot/implementation decisions done without a true understanding of the collaborative intensity of the work caused several problems.* One leader reflected, “I think intuitively we knew it was wrong when we heard consultants citing spans and layers numbers up to 20—like this is a standard for truly agile organizations. In some ways we

knew it could not work, but when you are just looking at the formal charts and what you need to get done, you don’t see the collaborations that are actually producing the work.”

In contrast, consider another well-regarded institution that made its foray into agile in a more informed way. This organization also had a CEO and senior leaders enamored with agile and, in particular, military analogies to SEAL teams. The top team decided to allocate \$25 million to a series of strategic initiatives that were to be accomplished through an agile methodology. Similar to our first example, this organization invested heavily in consultants, agile-method training, and coaches to help guide the agile teams. But then a few notable differences occurred.

First, this organization included network questions in its annual engagement survey so had the ability to assess patterns of collaboration and decision-making throughout the enterprise. *This enabled the company to staff agile teams differently. Rather than the conventional method of picking favorites or high-reputation employees—a process guaranteed to overwhelm already busy people and disrupt existing work flows—the leaders staffed efforts with a data-driven approach.* For example, they used the network information to select the second-tier connectors for agile teams: emerging talent that was less consumed by their colleagues, not the top talent that was almost always overloaded in the network. This helped to build capability of these “hidden” stars and prevented known high performers from experiencing career-derailing collaborative overload (i.e., being overburdened by a high volume of requests for their expertise).

They also staffed the teams with key opinion leaders from units most affected by the downstream results of the work. This helped bring relevant insights into the design of the solutions. Importantly, these key opinion leaders worked their network early on to co-create solutions more broadly and avoid downstream rejection. “Using the network analysis to staff the teams definitely resulted in an entirely different list of people to bring into the efforts. It kept us from overwhelming our favorites. And staffing with key opinion leaders from downstream areas avoided the typical thing where great ideas die the death of one thousand cuts,” reflected a senior agile sponsor.

Early in their work, the agile teams were required to draw on subject-matter and local experts through both on-site planning forums and collaborative technologies. The network analysis helped the teams see those people that the network turned to for specific expertise. By engaging these experts,

the teams were able to bring in needed knowledge at the right point and, later, also benefit from the experts' legitimacy when implementation was underway. "We learned that our workforce planning systems missed the social capital factor. We would see we had hired ten high-end, well-credentialed experts and treat them all the same. In reality, the network listened to two or three of these experts; the others were far less influential. Engaging the right ones at the right time enabled us to get the best ideas, balance the work demands, and address the adoption side earlier."

The agile leaders were taught to use leadership approaches that acknowledged their contributors' diverse interests and motivations, rather than managing them as a traditional team. Time spent in conventional team building—developing a single common vision and goal, trust-building workshops, and so on—can be overdone. In our work with different companies applying agile methods, we have seen it is more effective to have an array of principles for members to engage with. With that clarity, teams can manage specific interdependencies in the work collaboratively, reduce overload on the heavily sought out team members, and ensure people on the edge of the team's network are included to distribute load and engage diverse perspectives. As one scrum leader indicated: "People engage in this work for different reasons, and they have different needs to collaborate. When I began to see that and manage team commitment and collaborative interdependencies differently, more began to happen. It was a big turning point for me. Our habit was to just kind of blindly throw meetings at problems and assume we need to get everyone on the same page. In reality, I found that people cared about different aspects of the work and by forcing them all into one vision, they lost what they felt was important."

In contrast to the first company's implementation of agile, the results from the second company have been better so far. Certainly, there have been ups and downs in implementation, but overall far fewer signs of overload debilitating existing and new work—and no catastrophic failures. A significant driver of this success is the evidence-based way the second organization

understood and worked with the collaborative nature and intensity of work.

Our point is not that agile is inherently flawed. Rather, it is that the management of these initiatives must factor in the collaborative complexity of the work to be successful. Most employees today spend 85% or more of their time in collaborative activities—to not factor this aspect of the work into critical decisions is a recipe for failure.² From our ongoing research into networks and team effectiveness, we have derived four practices of agile success:

- 1 Select agile teams based on human and social capital.** Staff agile teams with employees who have the network capacity to generate a high-quality work product and employees who can help ensure it is adopted by the broader organization. Don't simply pick high-reputation talent, an approach that propagates overload/burnout and unnecessarily disrupts existing work flows.
- 2 Proactively manage connectivity with experts outside the team.** Ensure appropriate influx of external information/experts and alignment of work product with local market/stakeholder needs. Don't frame a problem or craft a solution without domain expertise and local/contextualized knowledge.
- 3 Manage team collaboration and energy/purpose as a network.** Manage collaborative networks inside and outside of the team. Don't over-use traditional team interventions that propagate overload but rather look to balance collaborative load, manage interdependencies, and cascade purpose/energy.
- 4 Simultaneously innovate work outcome and adopting network.** Co-create solutions with critical stakeholders and key influencers in networks with particular emphasis on seeking out negative opinion leaders early. Don't perfect plans in isolation in hopes of gaining acceptance through logic or mandate later.

1 Practice 1: Select Agile Teams Based on Human AND Social Capital

Companies looking to scale agile efforts spend a great deal of time and money identifying and prioritizing potential initiatives. Surprisingly, though, when it comes time to staff those teams, most leaders select people based on employees' reputation, leaders' recommendations, and possibly performance ratings. McKinsey notes that getting the right people in the right positions means relying on past performance metrics and top performers.³ Accenture guides agility-seeking firms to leverage predictive intelligence, with a heavy emphasis on placing the right skills on the right work and aspiration that companies evolve sophistication with collaborative analytics to do so effectively.⁴ One problem with such a focus on human capital alone is that employees who have built reputations as team players or top performers are

usually widely connected across organizational networks and heavily taxed by collaborative demands. In most organizations, 3-5% of the people absorb 20-35% of collaborative demands. These quintessential team players are almost always the ones who come to mind when leaders are staffing an agile effort. Unfortunately, when high-reputation people are repeatedly tapped for key efforts, they experience overload—ultimately hurting their engagement and performance and slowing down work as others are not able to access them.

Selecting overloaded employees to run or support an agile initiative results in multiple problems, several of which have second-order implications that are harder to recognize without collaborative analytics. The obvious issue is that the agile effort suffers—just giving employees a new assignment

does not prevent their prior network from coming to them for ongoing advice and guidance. Their time and attention get pulled from the agile team. The knock-on effect is disruption to the projects and teams these well-regarded individuals are pulled from. In one biotech company we worked with, for example, a hotshot scientist was pulled into a leadership role for a new molecule research team because the work in his core project was chugging along at pace. Sprinting in his new agile project demanded near-complete mindshare, but teammates on the prior project—a much higher strategic priority for the company—still needed his expertise. Infighting between project sponsors reached the board level. Our research across many companies repeatedly shows how prevalent this scenario is, with overloaded employees sometimes staffed on as many as ten or more projects at once.⁵ Clearly, the metaphors of SEAL teams or speedboats ignores the reality of disrupted work, hurting individuals and undermining success. As one leader put it when looking at our results: “The network analytics help you see that what we thought of in terms of SEAL teams are actually interconnected efforts slinging water skiers all over the place and leaving way too many people to sink. Things don’t happen in isolation.”

The solution is to factor in *social capital*, using network insights to staff efforts rather than default to intuition or purely human capital assessments. Specifically, more successful companies pick second-tier connectors to engage talent they want to pull further into the network and avoid burning out established stars. Amazon is one organization that has been very successful in driving results through teams. Despite its size, the company’s “two-pizza team” norm has been a guidepost to keep efforts from becoming too large. First articulated by Jeff Bezos, the idea is that attendance at meetings should be limited to a group small enough to be fed by two pizzas—no more. The two-pizza team has become a popular analogy to express the value of operating in small groups, a core idea for agile initiatives. First, keeping the engaged team small allows for those that otherwise would get pulled into the meeting to do something else with their time. Second, and perhaps more important, is the notion that more is not always better. Additional human capital may not result in better outcomes; the synergies that come from meaningful social connections can surpass what might be done by more people that barely connect with each other on a larger team. While some would question Amazon’s decision in terms of scale efficiencies, the company more than compensates through innovation and speed.

Amazon Device’s Talent and Leadership Development Team has taken a human and social capital approach to optimize the two-pizza structures and reduce collaborative overload to ensure team health throughout the system. They have used ONA to increase decision-making velocity, improve talent deployment, and identify ways interconnected organizations and teams collaborate to develop the next big idea. One of the most important elements of Amazon’s culture is creating an environment where collaboration across teams is highly

encouraged. For example, new ideas are incubated through its Working Backwards process (i.e., writing a one-page press release describing a customer’s experience of a new product/process or service as if it has already launched) and other adaptive, cross-boundary practices such as co-labs and Think Big conferences. Think Big conferences at Amazon are multiple-day events where teams across all locations and job types are invited to pitch their biggest innovative idea to a panel of judges, with the best ideas becoming sponsored.

However, in such a rich and collegial environment, the threat of over-collaboration can derail efforts to be agile. One ONA conducted within the Amazon Devices organization sought to determine if employees absorbing the most demand in the network experienced collaborative overload. A short survey was created to investigate two types of employee networks: 1) whom employees go to for decision-making requests; and 2) whom employees go to for innovation requests.

There were key differences among the decision-making and innovation networks when assessing collaborative overload. For the decision-making networks, employees who received 25% or more of incoming requests were more likely to experience collaborative overload. These requests included help in removing barriers such as obtaining approvals and assistance in getting access to the right technical resources. As a result of the network insights, leaders were able to take actions to reduce cross-team dependencies, decrease the overall number of approvals required, and ensure quicker access to needed technical resources. Some examples of actions taken included bringing teams under a common leader for faster decision-making, modifying team structure to be smaller and more agile, balancing workload more effectively, and building mechanisms for leaders to audit the collaborative demands of the work.

For the innovation network, employees receiving the most requests for input on new or innovative ideas (i.e., innovation influencers) did *not* experience collaborative overload. This was a key finding and resulted in the Devices organization more effectively leveraging innovation influencers for cross-team initiatives. To reduce this population’s risk of future overload, actions were taken to ensure these influential employees had the right allocation of resources, protected innovation time, and effective team structures in place. This freed up valuable time for innovation influencers to work backwards from the Amazon customer and use their network to test and improve upon the next big idea.

As organizations deploy more sophisticated digital technologies for communications, work products, planning, and calendaring, we have an increasingly robust means of helping them see and assess networks. For example, Microsoft’s Workplace Analytics tool makes it possible to assess collaborative time in ways that inform agile decisions. One financial institution deploying these tools had a focus on becoming more agile and customer facing in team execution.

Using Workplace Analytics, the company looked at the workloads and networks of different departments (people were de-identified, and their data aggregated). They were not looking for individuals to target, but for ways to improve teams that had a lot of isolated individuals or unbalanced workloads. The company realized they were slow to onboard people—sometimes it took over two years for a new hire to get to the same network pattern as a more effective employee in the same position. And, there were whole sets of people whose workweek was less than 30 hours while their peers in other teams had workweeks twice as long.

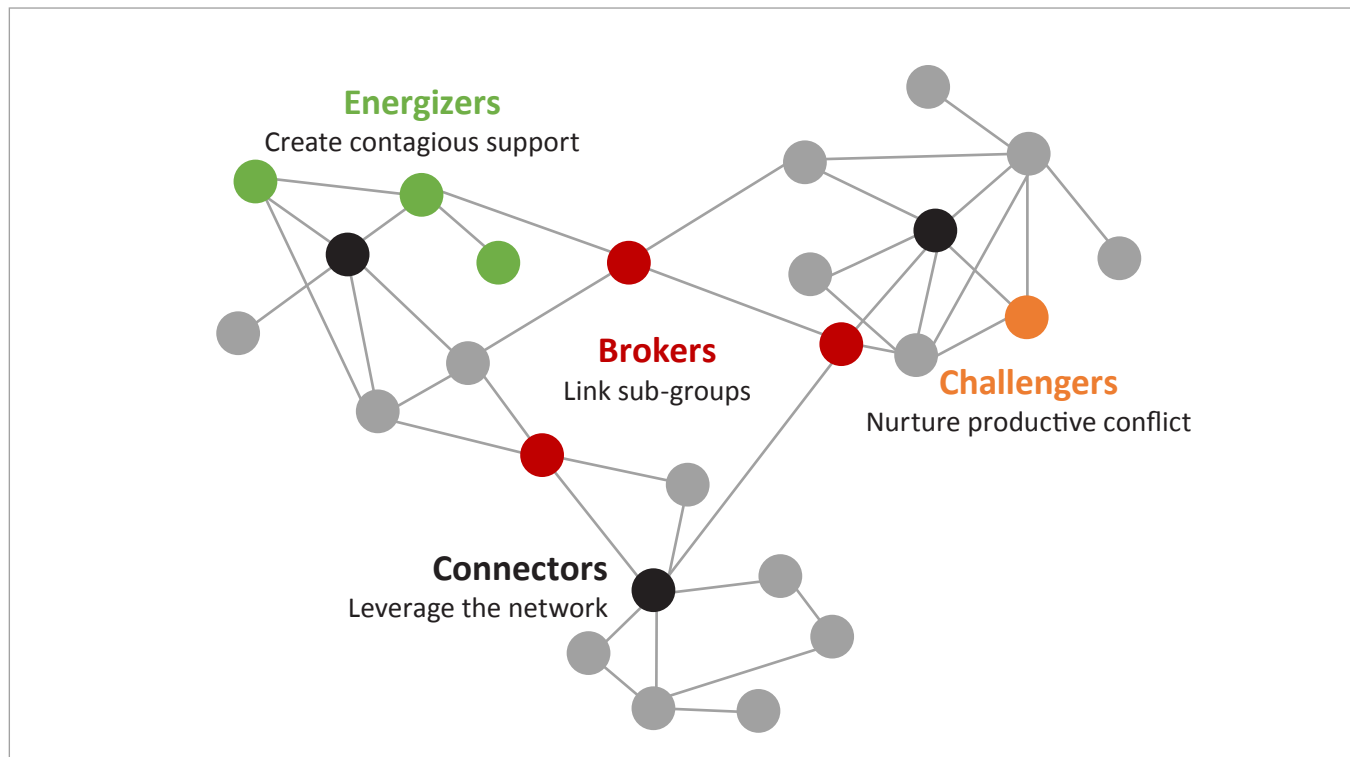
Armed with a more accurate understanding of the network and collaborative demands placed on people, the organization’s leaders made more effective decisions. Specifically, in rolling out new processes and systems as a product of the agile transformation, they used the data to: 1) prioritize teams with stagnant networks and low collaborative workloads for coaching and critical path work; 2) identify teams where the workloads and networks were internally imbalanced to supply tools and practices for information sharing, training, and onboarding team members; 3) locate teams that were running “hot” with heavy collaboration demands and large, complex, or shifting networks, and decelerate change demands as much as possible to reduce risk from stress and burnout; and 4) illuminate the teams with positive external interactions with customers, so they could

make sure that the customer-focused transformation reached everyone who was involved.

In addition to managing collaborative load on the system, another reason to apply collaborative analytics when staffing agile efforts is to make sure nominated team members have the right connections into parts of the organization where the agile team’s output will need to be adopted. In contrast to software development, where agile concepts first emerged, many agile approaches are now applied to work that must be adopted through an organization. Without the right influencers on board, the likelihood of “not invented here” can kill implementation through “death by a thousand cuts.”

Specifically, companies in our research have gone to great lengths to select team members based on human capital (expertise) AND social capital (employees in specific network positions that will facilitate implementation). For example, Michael Arena, Chief Talent Officer at General Motors, has driven significant innovation and change through agile teams formed through four network roles—brokers (or boundary spanners), connectors, energizers, and challengers (See Exhibit 1). GM leverages these roles in different ways to develop an innovation—whether a product, service, or new way of working—and move it into the operational system as efficiently as possible. Adopting this perspective allowed GM to tap into not only the right human capital, but also critical social capital when it came to innovation in autonomous vehicles.

Exhibit 1 Staffing Agile With Key Network Opinion Leaders



GM knew it needed to become more agile in regards to self-driving technology and as such acquired Cruise Automation in 2016. Kyle Vogt, the co-founder of Cruise, was quickly seen by Arena and others as a connector—he brought together autonomous engineers, software developers, data scientists, and even mapping technicians and cohered them into a keenly focused team. Connectors are passionate experts and are often embedded in their own network of similarly focused experts. In this case, cohesive teams were able to iterate together on self-driving capabilities using disparate data, ranging from information on pedestrian activity to road surfaces/patterns in order to develop complex algorithms. In under a year and a half, this initiative resulted in the development of four generations of driverless technology. GM was intentional to not fully absorb the team; rather, they leveraged brokers to connect the cohesive entrepreneurial team with the core operational side for access to additional resources such as engineering or testing when needed. This approach contributed to GM being the first in self-driving test vehicle assembly in a mass-production facility.

In this example, the confluence of three of the network roles were important to creating and leading a cohesive team in idea

exploration: 1) connectors; 2) brokers; and 3) energizers. Due to their position in the network, connectors are often conduits of information that people turn to for problem-solving. Energizers help create a safe, cohesive environment that facilitates idea exchange and engagement of team members. And brokers are essential to integrate ideas and reach deeply into the organization for both feedback and implementation support. [Even if prototyping occurs in siloed groups based on human capital, social capital is needed to vet ideas, access resources, drive commitment, and champion innovation across boundaries in the organization.](#) It is in these networks that agility occurs in an organization—the collaborations between, and at the edges of, the standard operational system and the entrepreneurial pockets of a firm. Arena explains: “This tension of operational and entrepreneurial activities came into play when GM acquired Cruise Automation. The startup remained focused on advancing self-driving technology, while the core of GM provided the operational fortitude necessary to scale these solutions into safe and reliable solutions. The only thing that helped integrate these worlds was the social connections necessary to actively manage the tension between these two priorities.”

2 Practice 2: Proactively Manage Connectivity with Experts Outside the Team

The best agile teams stay very close to customers so that they can react quickly to feedback and even help to shape, not just respond to, market conditions. What’s often missing, though, is the same level of connectivity to external domain experts or colleagues who can provide insight as to how solutions might work in a specific geography or market. For example, much of the advice to agile team leaders takes an internal focus with sixteen of McKinsey’s *Eighteen practices for organizational agility*⁶ and all six of Deloitte’s *Agile transformation approach* building blocks focusing on internal workings of teams⁷. The risk is that ideas developed in isolation fail to capitalize on the company’s related expertise, resulting in duplication or blind spots. Agile teams need connections to ideas and innovation in other parts of their own company as well as the broader ecosystem.

[How can leaders help agile teams stay connected to other stakeholders without losing speed or watering down insights gained from end-users? Our research shows that success comes from a system that manages the agile process as a full network, not a collection of isolated teams.](#) One approach that repeatedly fails is staffing key individuals on multiple teams at once to serve as links between projects. The hope is that these employees will become human knowledge transfer devices, but the reality is that people are spread so thin that they can’t keep track or add meaningful inputs to any of their projects. An R&D task force in one company we worked for was astonished when we ran the numbers from their utilization database: one key person was assigned to eleven different “high priority” teams. The other downside to

multi-teaming is that each project roster grows too large, and it becomes impossible to retain the agile practices of speed and adaptability.

One major consulting firm helps clients build needed connectivity by taking them on “go to see” visits to other companies. Far more powerful than just describing best practices, these trips give people first-hand experience of another organization’s ways of working—for example, how did a company set up and run their digital labs for rapid prototyping and refinement? Or, how did a major manufacturer start a large-scale advanced analytics transformation? Beyond merely learning on that visit, an explicit objective is to create a peer network among clients to foster ongoing dialogue, sharing, and innovation. The network-building shouldn’t stop here, however. Once leaders see the power of the idea-influx, they need the same mindset, focus, and support to access those kinds of resources inside their own organization.

More effective agile efforts actively manage external connectivity. As an example, Juniper networks built several broad campaigns around critical strategic initiatives that staffed teams through the network (Network Practice 1) and effectively integrated external expertise through problem framing and solution development phases (Network Practice 2). Customers worldwide depend on Juniper for forward-looking network technologies—yet with growth, the company’s operating model had become increasingly complex and innovation processes that had worked in the past were hitting organizational and relational walls. Craig Bardenheuer,

along with a group of colleagues, drove a series of critical initiatives termed One Juniper Innovation Challenges to help break this gridlock. He noted, “The target was to produce innovations that just were beyond what could be done within the formal organization structure which wasn’t conducive to the types of cross-boundary engagement and conversations required for innovation to thrive. By better leveraging expertise across engineering, infrastructure, and sales teams, we were very successful in doing this and generating some breakthrough innovations. But, to be honest, the real innovation was the lateral network that was formed and new way of working that came out of what we went through. Broader participation provided a fuller understanding of the problem itself and enabled better solutions. And learning to work across organization boundaries equipped individuals with skills to innovate well beyond these events.”

Juniper used ONA to understand the connections—or lack of them—among employees that were required to collaborate effectively in order to produce a critical innovation. The results showed minimal or no connectivity across some essential groups and helped inform strategies to drive successful innovation at these junctures. Once these teams were staffed through network practices, Juniper created a new kind of event to promote internal and external collaboration critical to agile innovation. Employees identified to take part in these efforts were initially invited to Innovation Challenge events, one of which was a three-day event held in San Francisco. When it comes to spurring innovation, location matters. Rather than meet in a hotel conference room, with bare walls and florescent lighting, the participants gathered in a transformed garage. Complete with industrial engineering equipment, whiteboards, and plenty of pizza, coffee, and beer, everything about the physical environment suggested this was a place to think differently. And nothing speaks to innovation more in Silicon Valley than a garage.

Typically, ideation sessions would open with the most senior leader providing a mandate and a detailed formal presentation. Rather than this approach—which would let the group fall into existing thought processes, siloed collaborations, and ineffective framing of the problem to be solved—employees were immediately sent out on the streets of San Francisco to better understand Juniper’s customers. As Bardenheuer explains, this approach allowed for team members to be “... under pressure together and have some fun together too.” Also, working together in this way enabled the teams to not just have some time to think about innovative issues in a new context but to have an exchange with a new group of people to completely question their existing assumptions. Equipped with journals, maps, and cameras, their task was to explore and capture new ideas and perspectives on future network technology. One team compared the San Francisco Chronicle and Bloomberg Media; another met the Chief Innovation Officer at a university seeking to reinvent education; another literally looked underneath the mattress in

one of the most luxurious hotels in the city. Everywhere they went, the teams considered: Where might this industry be in five years? Is technology transforming this industry? What networking breakthrough might be useful? Back at the garage, the network worked late into night to begin translating their observations into product ideas.

In addition to customer-based insights, the group also managed the external environment by innovatively tapping relevant domain expertise. Team members were charged with exploring their external connections to frame feasible solutions. With team members from diverse geographies and functions, as well as a range of experience in the company, there is a richer pool of outside resources to draw from. And the Juniper team also did something innovative to create greater dialogue with the company’s top internal experts. A handful of experts joined the network at the garage. To avoid the talking-head phenomenon and promote rapid and relevant knowledge-sharing, the experts became a Human Library. Teams could “check out” and “swap” experts, as you might check out a book from a library. This created a very different type of interaction, allowing for focused questioning and idea exploration.

Finally, the Juniper team also managed the interface with the critical project sponsors and stakeholders in ways that got their ideas and expertise into the problem-framing stage much earlier and more effectively than in the past. On day three in San Francisco, the network went to Juniper headquarters to discuss the two most promising ideas with a group of top executives—but, again, they did not go the traditional route. A “No Slide” rule was put into effect, with members of the network and executives standing side-by-side, sleeves rolled up, leaning over rolls of butcher paper with marker-drawn images and words. This invited an informal, peer-like discussion. The outcome of this challenge was that a hybrid of the two product ideas was recommended to move forward. Another similar challenge resulted in Juniper developing their certified pre-owned program: a \$300 million per year secondary market that they previously did not participate in. Not only did developing this nugget of an idea from the Innovation Challenge provide additional revenue, but it also allowed for benefits such as increased control over the brand and enhanced customer engagement. These types of ideas seem obvious in retrospect, but it took getting a different group of people together to brainstorm something that was previously not under development in any part of the organization. Equally important, the event created the right types of conversations and opened the door to more effective collaboration and innovation processes in the future by developing people through the process.

Other organizations have further adopted agile as they form teams and manage how they tap into the broader environment for expertise. For example, Genentech, a Member of the Roche Group, made very targeted organizational changes to accelerate medicine development timelines. Nancy Stern, Senior Development Excellence Leader, indicated: “We needed to

move faster in decision-making and reduce the time it takes to bring new therapies to patients. That was our challenge and our focus. With an increasingly diverse portfolio demanding equally diverse disease expertise, we must use our resources wisely to efficiently move molecules through the pipeline. In Product Development, we turned to purpose-built networks and agile ways of working as two means to accomplish this.” Genentech’s prior approach included the involvement of multiple committees and various levels of governance approval. By empowering network-centric, agile teams, the company sought to transform the way they work and expedite the delivery of breakthrough therapies to patients who are waiting.

This significantly shifted the role of teams, their composition, and the way these teams needed to identify and leverage expertise through the organization. Specifically, Genentech moved from having teams of up to 20 standing functional representatives and a broader pool of subject-matter experts meeting regularly to a model that encourages more fit-for-purpose involvement with *only* three permanent members. Doing so allowed Genentech to access internal expertise in a more focused manner and to move more quickly to frame and solve problems. “You don’t need all the functional experts who support a team involved all the time. The magic for us has been in helping to create approaches to agile that bring people in for the right purpose at the right time,” said Stern. “And sometimes that means encouraging people to feel okay about not attending a particular meeting if the topics don’t apply to them or require their involvement. And, conversely, to lean in and become involved where they feel they can add value.”

Genentech is finding that the structural elements of this transition were important, but the most critical aspect to manage is the mindset. Specifically, its purpose-built networks culture and targeted engagement of advocates (called Ambassadors) across the organization are key to helping world-class scientists and other experts operate differently. This network includes 25 respected and connected people from all functional areas and roles involved with the change. They are the eyes and ears for how the change is being perceived and accepted; they role model desired behaviors

and celebrate colleagues living the purpose and core values; and they facilitate and engage in conversations about this new way of working within their respective areas and peer networks. Meeting bi-weekly, the group stays informed of new tools and support avenues such as webinars and agility trainings and learns from each other from the experiences happening around the globe.

While Ambassadors are a key ingredient to helping employees adopt the new way of working—from helping them understand the ‘why’ and ‘what’s in it for me’ to encouraging continuous experimenting to adopting and mastering the new way of working—it is essential to connect and proactively bring expertise to bear as needed. To meet this demand, a group of on-call advisers replace the formal Review Committees, which these experts were drawn into before. Now employees can send an email or call an ad hoc meeting instead of securing time on an agenda a few months in advance.

In addition to new roles, the following principles have proven critical to promote an agile mindset: 1) Integrated and Global (e.g., seek inclusion across geographies and functions); 2) Fit-for-Purpose (e.g., create purposeful and effective collaborations to execute work); 3) Decision Focused and Fast (e.g., make trade-offs and decisions with an enterprise mindset); 4) Empowered and Accountable (e.g., take action when faced with ambiguity and less than complete information); and 5) Customer Centric (e.g., prioritize work in service of patients and science versus the organization). Notably, Empowered and Accountable allows Genentech to better understand the mindset change for how employees approach work. For instance, there are situations when all must be perfect such as with safety standards—there is no tolerance for error. At other times, pragmatism prevails and 80% is acceptable as in the case of PowerPoint graphics and formatting. Of course, speeding time to market has significant humanitarian and commercial value for Genentech. But in addition to specific molecule team success, early pulse surveys indicate that 65% of employee respondents feel more empowered now.

3 Practice 3: Manage Team Collaboration and Energy/Purpose as a Network

Teams have become the primary unit assigned work in organizations. As work has become more complex and interdependent, this has been a natural response to drive results. However, taken to an extreme, the concept of teams can be an easy way for leaders to throw bodies at a problem without really understanding how the work is getting done and what distinguishes more- and less- successful efforts from a collaborative standpoint.

Our work over the past two decades has continued to show the criticality of effective patterns of collaboration to team success. It isn’t just the sum of skills on a team that make it effective or innovative—it is the network that forms within and outside of

*the team and the nature of the interactions that create a climate of trust, purpose, and energy critical to collaborative work.*⁸ For example, in Google’s recent landmark study, aspects of team climate, particularly psychological safety, were consistently related to high performance.⁹ High levels of psychological safety indicate that there is comfort amongst team members and mistakes can be made without undue punishment. This culture of creativity and risk taking is nurtured through *relationships*, not a formalized mandate or staffing assignments.

A significant part of the problem for agile teams is that while work occurs through networks of relationships, most leaders don’t manage collaboration productively; they rely

on traditional team formation and development principles that create overload and sometimes gridlock in today's environments. Agile teams and organizations should not be approached as a broad ideal but rather as intentionally managed collaboration where it matters most—at the point of execution, where employees are working on new offerings or strategic initiatives (See Exhibit 2 for a Diagnostic Tool to Evaluate Collaboration at the Point of Execution). Our quantitative work over more than 30,000 employees and qualitative research through several hundred interviews has shown that agility at the point of execution is typically created through group-level networks nurtured through specific practices focused on four points in the networks:¹⁰

Manage the Center: Overloaded and under-recognized.

Engage the Fringe: Newcomers and experts/geographies.

Bridge Silos: Adjacencies for innovation and scale.

Promote Agility: Expertise transparency and external ties.

Systematic evidence shows that teams that nurture collaboration on these dimensions outperform, and organizations that adapt collaborative practices on these dimensions are likely to have higher market performance. Yet these patterns of collaboration are often invisible and unmanaged in many organizations. This is a significant cost as failure of teams and underperformance of first-level leaders is a major problem for most firms.

Cigna, another leading organization focused heavily on means of becoming more agile, has been able to apply network analytics to promote team agility and effectiveness in an interesting fashion. Specifically, their people analytics unit, under the direction of Bill Sipe, employed a network analysis survey to obtain an organization-wide view of collaboration throughout the firm. “This view gave us a mirror to see how these invisible patterns of collaboration occurred and then to take targeted action that could help us become more agile in a series of ways. For example, the analytics helped us see a small proportion of people that were collaboratively overwhelmed and invisibly slowing things down as well as possibly burning out,” said Sipe.

Similarly, the view also helped Cigna identify “hidden stars.” These were employees with large networks, high energizer scores, and low overall collaborative overload but that had not been identified as high potentials or performers via the traditional performance management processes. Making team leaders aware of these people and targeting them for growth opportunities is important to ensure utilization of their skills and networks as well as to avoid voluntary turnover/regrettable losses should they become disaffected and leave. When such people leave, they take not only their skills with them but also significantly disrupt networks relying on them to get work done.

The question is how to best help team leaders to begin to think in these network terms to be successful. This is where the pairing of insights generated from the people analytics

Exhibit 2 Diagnostic Tool to Evaluate Collaboration at the Point of Execution

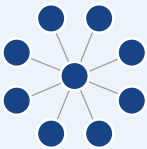
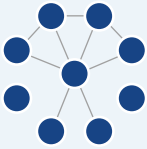
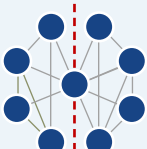
| COLLABORATION AT THE POINT OF EXECUTION | | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Usually | Always |
|--|--|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| | | | | | | |
| 1 | We ensure that people or roles within the group do not become so overloaded with collaborative demands that they are unable to support their colleagues in a timely fashion. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 2 | We scan for, identify, and reward employees who frequently engage in collaborative behaviors—such as offering resources, help, information, and contacts—that make their colleagues more effective. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 3 | We ensure that newcomers—either new hires or those from other parts of the organization—are integrated rapidly into the group and know who to turn to for information, expertise, resources, and decision approvals. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 4 | We make sure that subject-matter experts and high performers are available to help their colleagues in a timely manner on appropriate issues. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 5 | We facilitate effective collaboration at specific points in the group—across functional lines, physical distance, hierarchical levels, core projects, or expertise domains—where informal networks are critical to performance and innovation. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 6 | We spur innovation and organizational change by engaging employees with significant relationships across functional lines, physical distance, expertise domains, and demographic populations. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 7 | We make sure that employees in the group are aware of one another’s expertise, contacts, and resources and so know who to turn to for help when opportunities and problems arise. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 8 | We make sure that the group collaborates effectively with appropriate functions/divisions within the organization and with relevant stakeholders outside of the organization (such as key customers, vendors, and associations). | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

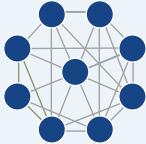

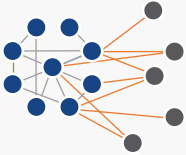
function with the content delivery capability of those in Cigna’s world-class learning and development group paid off in substantial ways. Cigna developed a five-module, virtually delivered program and diagnostic tool to help scale group and personal network management principles to team leaders that the network analysis revealed were struggling. “We were able to use a virtual learning platform and collaborative toolkit to help these leaders drive performance through their and their team’s networks differently. And, at the same time, we formed a peer community of team leaders at this level that enabled them to share ideas and practices,” said Leah Alibozek, Cigna’s Learning Experience Owner in Talent Management.

In contrast, our research has brought to light numerous examples where teams are staffed with effective people that fall into dysfunctional patterns of collaboration—too much,

too little, or involving the wrong people—and underperform. Most people can resonate with, for example, teams they have been a part of where the leader dominated all collaborative activity. Whether this person was excessively hierarchical, dominant, or perhaps well-intentioned but a bit insecure, the result is often the same: all communication and decision-making had to flow through this person, even when teammates could have resolved an issue on their own. Ultimately, these leaders become swamped by the sheer volume of meetings, emails, and interactions to address increasingly small issues. They become bottlenecks in the network and slow the team’s progress, often make poor decisions due to overload, and rob the engagement of team members. All too often, this common pattern results in slow decision-making, poor accountability, and lack of team engagement (See *Hub and Spoke* in Exhibit 3).

Exhibit 3 Network Patterns Derailing Team Success

| | Issue | Collaborative Driver | Solution |
|---|---|---|---|
| INTERNAL PATTERNS | | | |
| <p>Hub and Spoke</p>  | Excessive focus on leader or expert results in slow decision making, path dependence in ideas, burnout of that individual, and lack of engagement from team. | Leaders and followers hold outdated notions of leadership or defer to high-status experts too much. Team members might not be aware of each other’s expertise or are afraid that reaching out signals weakness or reduces their control over their turf. Patterns become entrenched due to all parties’ expectations. | Measure, then reduce, information this person is sought for and decisions they are pulled into. Re-allocate some responsibilities to less-connected team members to shift burden and engage the team more fluidly. |
| <p>Disenfranchised</p>  | When some team members are mostly or entirely disconnected from the team’s core, expertise goes untapped and miscommunication rises dramatically; the higher their isolation, the lower their engagement. | Marginalized team members might be staffed only part-time on this team so seen as peripheral. Or, they could be low status or socially different kinds of people who don’t “fit” with teammates. | Hold a team launch (or re-launch) to clarify roles and responsibilities and be explicit how each person’s expertise contributes to the team work. Use expertise discovery or brainstorming techniques to locate emergent innovation. |
| <p>Misaligned</p>  | Factions in the team create tensions and undue conflict; teams waste time on politics rather than content, and decisions may be watered-down compromises rather than optimal choices. | Fault lines can emerge from internal politics, occupational values or expertise, geography, or subgroups that share demographic or professional characteristics (e.g., senior vs. junior employees). | Establish and emphasize shared goals that all team members can embrace. Start with the “why” of the work before the “what” and the “how” to create engagement and energy around the task. This reduces people agreeing in room then pursuing different goals. |

| Issue | Collaborative Driver | Solution |
|---|--|---|
| INTERNAL PATTERNS | | |
| <p>Overwhelmed</p>  | <p>All team members get involved in all processes and communications, leading to insufficient time to do individual work, inefficient decision making, excessive compromise, lower engagement, and ultimately burnout.</p> | <p>Unclear roles or lack of clarity of others' expertise leads to over-inclusiveness. Desire to be overly involved and "fear of missing out" often stem from systems that reward process over outcome. Weak leaders may rely on over-involvement to diffuse personal accountability.</p> <p>Clearly delineate roles, responsibilities and true interdependencies. Focus meeting time and email activities on the interdependencies. Set and enforce group norms about thoughtful, targeted communication; make "reply all" a last resort.</p> |
| EXTERNAL PATTERNS | | |
| <p>Isolated from Environment</p>  | <p>Ideas are developed in isolation from their context, downstream users of the output, and experts outside the team; this is the typical failure of skunkworks and self-managed teams.</p> | <p>The belief that a small group of people pursuing innovative ideas needs to be protected from the pressures and politics of the mainstream business cuts them off from important information and influencers.</p> <p>Use network data to identify key downstream influencers and experts inside and outside the company to ensure appropriate influx of knowledge and alignment of work product with market and stakeholder needs.</p> |
| <p>Priority Overload</p>  | <p>Excessive or misaligned goals are set by too many external stakeholders with competing needs.</p> | <p>Many organizations fail to take a systemwide view of how their people are deployed, such as knowing how many teams each person works on.</p> <p>Collect and crunch the data to see interdependencies; intervene to balance collaborative load. Explicitly align goals and empower all team members to raise conflicts at earliest moment.</p> |

In our work, we find this pattern can emerge subtly when team leaders ask to be copied on emails between members and then answer before the recipient does, for example. Or, when a team member feels the need to clear small decisions with the leader before proceeding. Either way, the root cause is a set of outdated notions that the leader needs to be in charge all the time, calling the shots, and aware of all inputs. We know, however, that even life-or-death situations like surgery, firefighting, or landing airplanes require empowered team members who speak up and interact directly with each other.

How do organizations overcome the tendency for leaders or experts to become bottlenecks? If it is already happening, the first step is to measure the information this person is sought for and decisions they are pulled into. Then, reallocate some tasks to less-connected team members to shift the burden, engage the team more fluidly and create clear decision rights (for example, a RACI matrix). To build connection between team members, hold a team launch discussion in which members clarify their own expertise and how it relates to the team's goal; this way, members know where to turn when they have questions or inputs, other than the formal leader. Finally, reinforce the overarching team goal and make sure people don't

guard their turf in the mistaken belief that controlling a small piece is more credit-worthy than contributing to the whole.

The converse problem is an overly connected team where all teammates get involved in all processes and communications. We have repeatedly seen this pattern—whether created by excessively relational cultures or just ineffective leaders that assume effective collaboration means full involvement of everyone—drive gridlock and burn employees out. This pattern results in inefficient decision-making, wasted time, and an overwhelmed team, even when it arises from subtle and well-intentioned reasons. Again, both the team leader and members can take specific steps to prevent the dysfunctional pattern of communication (see *Overwhelmed* in Exhibit 3).

Typical team failure archetypes our research has shown over the years are portrayed in Exhibit 3, which delineates the issue, its causes, and some concrete steps to improve team functioning. Leaders can easily take this exhibit into team meetings and ask members to reflect on which pattern is most like the one they are operating in. We've learned that even when the situation is not extreme, team members find at least minor ways to tweak the patterns to improve interactions and future-proof the team against dysfunctional collaboration.

Of course, effective collaboration requires more than just information flow. Relationships and interactions within more successful teams are typically characterized as ones where trust exists, where people get a sense of purpose from their collaborations, and where energy is generated in interactions with colleagues. Psychological safety, which is related to trust and has become a pronounced goal for many organizations today, is a baseline condition for more successful teams to be sure. But to move to aspirational levels, leaders need to create contexts where people they connect with experience a sense of purpose in their work and are energized from their collaborations. Those that do this well are rewarded handsomely. Across 20 years of work mapping networks in over 300 organizations, we have repeatedly shown that cultivating energy in networks is four times the predictor of a high performer, and leaders that do this well enjoy lower attrition, attract higher performers, and produce more innovative results.

Ford Motor Company is another organization moving into agile methods in a significant way to speed time to market. The initiatives have been undertaken in a holistic fashion to break down silos in networks where innovation had stalled and decision-making slowed as new product development programs struggled to get alignment across functions. In this transition, Ford has placed emphasis on managing the center of the network through targeted efforts to reduce collaborative overload. It is also piloting a course similar to Cigna to help create greater capability for the company's program and project leads to drive results through networks. Julie Lodge-Jarrett, Director of Global Talent Management, indicates, "Helping promote efficiency of collaboration first is really important. At one level, when we can show people how to buy back large portions of their time by collaborating differently, it helps them engage in behaviors we need across silos. And at a second level, it helps from a health and well-being standpoint in this new world of work."

But Ford is also managing collaboration in agile efforts more deeply by creating a physical and cultural context, embracing a new way of working to shift mindsets on market solutions and ways of collaborating in new product development to meet dramatically different market demands. Jim Baumbick, Vice President of Enterprise Product Line Management Strategy and Planning indicates, "We had strong regions and skilled teams, but we didn't consistently emphasize treating every product as a business. Through agile, we are looking to scale the models of our most successful businesses." From a collaborative standpoint, Ford learned a lot about the employee base when studying more successful product lines. Specifically, they found: 1) a deep affinity for the product line, with employees living and breathing the product line daily; 2) successful product lines were characterized by more empowered teams with autonomy to make decisions to optimize business outcomes; 3) there was deeper customer intimacy and understanding in these product lines; 4) much greater employee continuity over time as employees learned from multiple product lifecycles; and 5) a

franchise DNA where "customers and employees knew deeply what the product line stood for."

Baumbick set out to re-create these conditions for success across eight product categories where an enterprise manager was accountable for their product lines, and each was run as an agile business focused on human-centered design and fast decision cycles. Shared accountability for business performance goals (e.g., Return on Invested Capital, profitability, and customer satisfaction) helped to reduce decision gridlock and team member disengagement—a significant problem in the past when functional goals had been too prominent. A key component of each team's success early-stage problem solving lies with active customer engagement in very new ways to solve future problems. In addition, the teams' physical space has evolved into a critical context that helps to streamline collaboration both inside and outside the teams. For example, on the walls of one team room are literally hundreds of customer stories defining product needs and helping Ford reconsider transportation in the age of mobility. The entire cross-functional team sits together daily in a shared context: product development, manufacturing, finance, marketing, etc. These more direct interactions have clearly sped decision-making and also cultivated a sense of trust across prior silos.

Ford has also focused on engaging senior leaders with the teams' work and decision cycles in a more positive, nimble fashion. For example, each week, senior leaders come into what Ford calls "shirt sleeve meetings" to make more rapid decisions. "We rarely are providing the leaders all the data but rather are asking the leadership team to make decisions with what we think is enough data," Baumbick says. This is a major cultural shift from a context where people had become used to drafting substantial position papers and slide decks and the dialogue often centered on trying to catch the flaw deep in the report. For example, one product decision had to be made regarding a product's home in either the new Bronco family or the new Built Ford Tough family—a decision which traditionally would take at least a series of papers to be written, multiple escalations, reviews, and iterations on a couple of milestones. In this more agile way of working, the team held one strategic review meeting with senior decision makers where they styled a full-size clay model with half focused on the Bronco theme and half on the Built Ford Tough theme. The result of this more agile approach to collaboration was a decision that day to pursue the Built Ford Tough theme.

A lot of Ford's success innately hinges on not just providing the tools and mandate for agile collaboration but also shifting the mindset to collaborate across silos and with senior decision makers more fluidly. Kumar Galhotra, President of Ford North America, has pushed back on people's desire to be the smartest person in the room or have every level of management serve the bosses at the next level. What is most effective, Galhotra says, is holding teams accountable during the 17 meetings he holds twice a week. Two dozen people stand together reviewing notes and data taped to the walls, examining and discussing all

elements of the business. He had nameplates stripped from office doors on the executive level and transformed the area at Ford World Headquarters known as the Glass House into what people now call franchise rooms or energy rooms. Each is marked with “F-Series” or “Expedition” or “Mustang.” Every player from each team meets to talk directly; avoiding memos, PowerPoints, and long waits for anything. “We have this ability to bring the entire operating team together, working hand-in-hand, with all of our business data on the wall. We used to be all in different areas, different buildings ... phone calls, emails, formal presentations back and forth to each other ... the fact that we’re sitting together and all looking at things together has really made a difference in the quality and speed of our decisions,” explained Bill Gubing, Chief Engineer - Explorer.

“Speed is money,” Galhotra said. “The idea is clarity of thought, as much of the information as you can get, and then allow the team to execute with that direction and get out of the way so they can go at a speed that is commensurate with how we need to compete in the future.” The business results are significant as Ford is taking many months out of the typical timeline from program kickoff to first vehicle delivered to market. And the cultural change is also producing payoff in employee engagement in very positive ways. Earl Lucas, chief designer at Lincoln, indicated, “Franchise rooms and energy rooms didn’t exist before this. It’s a much more intimate conversation. Usually management does things to you and not with you. Kumar is human. He does things with you.”

4 Practice 4: Simultaneously Innovate Work Outcome and Adopting Network

A frequent tendency in agile efforts is to partition the work that an agile team is doing and view development and implementation as separate activities. *But agile efforts—whether aimed at software development, a product innovation, a redesign of performance management systems, or a digital marketing campaign—should build in the adoption and sustainability of the initiative much earlier than most everyone anticipates.* In advice on moving agile beyond software development, BCG notes that one of the biggest shifts for firms is to rethink just how separate development and users tend to be; they recommended leveraging hard data over estimates and assumptions in order to adapt.¹¹ Our work goes further to show how more successful leaders today are innovating the idea and the adopting network simultaneously.

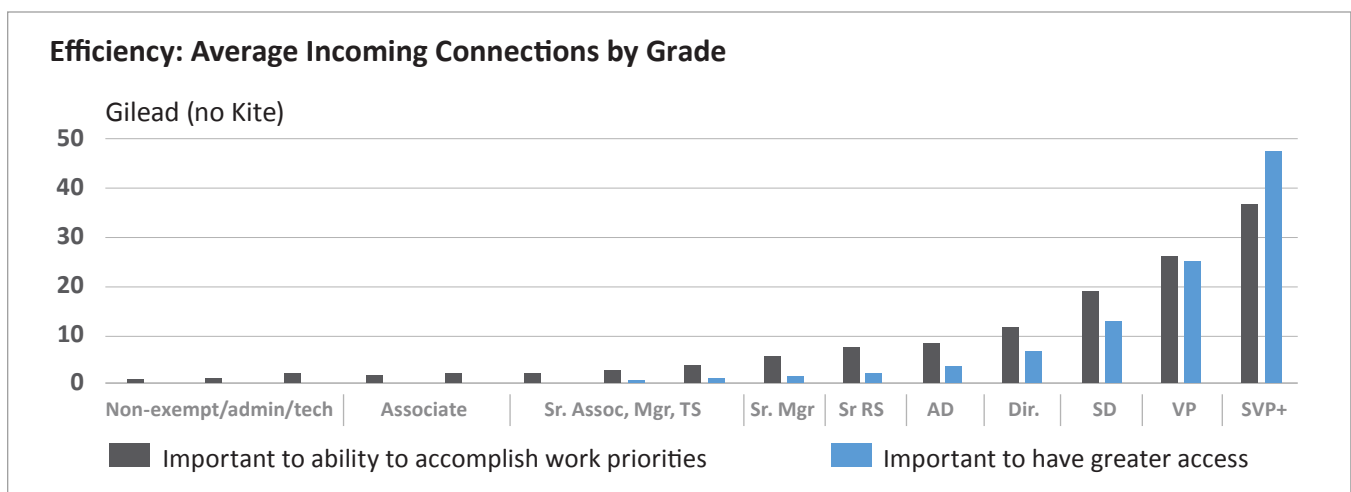
At an organization-wide level, we have seen companies make significant strides by applying the network lens to assess inefficiencies around information flow and decision-making. For example, Brian Miller and Craig Sabol leveraged network analysis at Gilead Sciences to create a collaborative context

that led to greater agility. Gilead is a biopharmaceutical company focused on life-threatening diseases. Brian is Gilead’s vice president of talent, development, and inclusion, and Craig heads up the company’s programs and people analytics team. Each are very interested in using collaborative analytics to improve agility through decision-making efficiency and effectiveness at Gilead.

Together, they launched an organization-wide network analysis survey in an effort to explore the roles different groups played in how work got done outside of the traditional organizational hierarchy. As part of their larger employee survey, they included three simple network questions to better understand work-related collaboration: 1) Who is important to your ability to accomplish work priorities; 2) Who is important for you to have greater access to; and 3) Who provides you with career-related advice?

The network analysis allowed them to see at what levels decisions were being made and who else people could turn to, and debate whether the current organizational design was the

Exhibit 4 Creating an Agile Context at Gilead



right model given the size and complexity of the organization (See Exhibit 4). Results showed that as people rose in the hierarchy, their number of connections increased dramatically—not only for information flow (the gray bar) but also for people who needed greater access to these leaders to get their work done (the blue bar). Typically, when the blue bar exceeds 1/3 of the grey bar, we see that agility becomes hampered in ways that are invisible when just looking at a formal structure.

Being able to visualize this discrepancy enabled Gilead to take targeted action and begin to push down decision-making to the right level. As an example, Gilead lowered approval thresholds to open a job requisition and to approve a job offer. Additionally, purchasing approval ranges more than doubled for many levels of the organization. These changes allowed the organization to move more quickly on recruiting candidates and executing work orders. Broader, cultural aspects of decision-making are now being explored, with an eye to bringing in influential people across the organization earlier in problem-solving conversations and well before they are needed for approval or adoption.

At a more granular level, an emergent network to co-create and facilitate agility demands new ways of working. [Resistance is typical when colleagues are expected to support or implement an already-developed project that they feel is being done to or pushed on them.](#) In even the best cases, projects miss the benefit of earlier intervention by those that could have been consulted to add value, while in the worst cases, projects may be derailed by de-energizers or powerful naysayers that are not on board. [It is neither sustainable nor realistic for all stakeholders to be staffed on the project, but more effective teams do engage influencers earlier and in a more strategic manner.](#) The solution is for leaders to not just keep longer-term implementation in mind when staffing agile teams, but also to create a culture where the adopting network is developed alongside the work.

Shifting in this way requires leaders to work in sometimes counterintuitive ways, for example: 1) get ideas to the 60% mark and then co-create; and 2) locate negative opinion leaders early—sometimes these are more toxic people but just as often they are individuals simply pulling in an opposite direction due to their priorities. [Rather than let projects fall apart or fade away due to insufficient buy in, more effective leaders in our research were far more likely to uncover and engage negative opinion leaders early rather than think they could win later by brute force or logic.](#) For example, one leader we interviewed faced a challenge in the form of inefficiencies due to a lack of standardized processes. He was based in the IT function, but the pain of unstandardized reporting was felt throughout the organization. Disparate data collection was challenging, making it nearly impossible to gain a strategic view of the company. Not only were there different processes for reporting across units and geographies, but the content of reports varied as well. The IT leader had the support of senior management to implement a company-wide change, but

no buy in from business leads. He also had tangible support in the form of IT resources, but knew it was not enough to reach the goal of standardizing the process to create a common, insightful report that was comparable across units and geography. They needed intangible support and ongoing commitment, not just once the new report process was in place but well before—starting as early as the brainstorming sessions on process understandings and improvements.

The solution was to work in several ways to cultivate a network of support, both formal and informal, across the organization—and well in advance of implementation through four activities. First, the leader knew he needed shared thought across siloes—the process could not be seen solely as an IT initiative. He built coalitions to garner political support, which is essential in cross-functional and seemingly divergent practice improvements. Second, he created momentum through promoting the high visibility and potential impact of the project. Momentum was sustained through ongoing updates on how the project would alleviate organizational pain points across siloes, which helped team members keep focus despite the increased workload on top of existing daily tasks. Third, the leader established a small task force of experts from functions across the organization; this, along with pilots in different locations can be an effective way to co-create throughout the process. Also, pulling in influencers to these pivotal roles can help shape later rollouts. Lastly, he ensured that meetings were consistently productive. He did not want initiative involvement to be seen as another never-ending obligation; to this end, he worked to make sure that meeting time was used effectively and that attendees realized the return on the investment of time.

As a result of adapting the network and idea at the same time, the organization saw notable improvements. For example, redundancy in the work was reduced. Information was readily available and comparable across the organization. People could spend time strategizing on insights rather than on data aggregation. Less time was wasted attempting to align different variables or time periods from countless reports. Data collection was more efficient and information dissemination more effective. Report content was accessible and manageable for those across roles, even without technical skills. These results were not a foregone conclusion: they came from the leader framing change as compromise to more effectively convey shared ownership of the work; this was coupled with tangible representations where he convincingly articulated the “before” and “after” with data or visuals. Instilling feelings of shared ownership of a tangible, yet discretely solvable, problem promoted shared commitment to implementing the solution. Uptake came easily due to visible implementation by early influencers because the skills and reputation of those that he brought on the journey. The top-down influence from senior management was necessary but enrolling good collaborators with high visibility and influence throughout the process was crucial in motivation

to adopt change. Lastly, shared voice and responsibility in the project resulted in commitment and enthusiasm from the cross-functional team members when it came time for implementation, thereby messaging the project effectively throughout pockets of the organization that may not have been directly involved.

Successful agile teams in our research are typically innovating on both levels—the work outputs and the network—via five key actions:

1. Tap into adjacent expertise and a broad network early in problem solving.
2. Create engagement (vs. pushing ideas) early in interactions.
3. Identify, organize, and engage a solution-development team based in part on network influence.
4. Develop a solution prototype early to build trust and mobilize the broader network.
5. Communicate the early-stage solution and iterate with the network in rollout.

Conclusion

Adopting an agile approach holds the promise of achieving quicker speed to market on innovative products and outcomes that are more strategically important to the company, more interesting to end-users, and developed in ways that engage an organization's most valuable employees. Yet, all too often, agile implementation places a misguided emphasis on the team as a stand-alone entity. Not recognizing agile teams as embedded in broader collaborative networks leads to failure—either in the work product or its adoption, in the disruption of work flows from which agile team members are extracted or, increasingly, in the burnout and even departure of overloaded team members. Instead, leaders can focus on identifying and managing collaboration patterns both inside and outside the team to enhance sustainable success. Organizations that get it right have the chance not only to react more quickly to competitive demands, but to shape the landscape to their advantage.

ENDNOTES

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