

What is agile working and why is it important? Read about how new ways of working are helping companies adapt to change.

## Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

### Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

#### Vocabulary

1. .... agile
2. .... to clarify
3. .... globalisation
4. .... rain or shine
5. .... a constraint
6. .... one size fits all
7. .... to gather
8. .... productivity

#### Definition

- a. a thing that limits something
- b. able to move quickly and easily
- c. to come together in a group
- d. the rate at which a person, company, etc. does useful work
- e. to make something clear or easier to understand
- f. the development of closer economic, political and cultural relations between all the countries of the world because of travel and communication becoming easier
- g. suitable for use in all circumstances or situations
- h. no matter what happens

## Agile working

The world we live in is changing and it is changing rapidly. Whether this is driven by technology, globalisation or in response to specific crises, there is no doubt that the workplace of today needs to constantly adapt to ongoing changes in order to remain efficient and competitive.

In more traditional work settings, the definition of a good employee was someone who came to the office on time at 9 a.m., sat at their desk and worked hard, taking direction from their managers and following the rules. This model employee would be there rain or shine, always appearing busy until it was time to go home at 6 p.m. But with the development of smartphones and internet technologies, many companies are starting to form virtual teams with team members living in different time zones, and employees are now finding themselves answering emails, attending meetings and working on reports from home outside their usual working hours. People now need to work smarter and not just harder.

It is not only the time and location of the modern workplace that is changing. The role of the manager is evolving too. Many organisations are moving away from an approach where managers constantly supervise their staff and tell people exactly what is to be done. Instead,

they are adopting a more project-based approach, where managers have the responsibility of clarifying project goals and enabling teamwork and collaboration. The roles that the individuals play might differ from project to project, and agile managers can serve to support team members in adapting the way they contribute to a team.

These changes in modern work practices mean that organisations need to adopt agile working approaches so that they can find the most appropriate and efficient way of getting things done. The consumer goods company Unilever describes agile working as ‘an approach to getting work done with maximum flexibility and minimum constraints’.

Agile working is not just about allowing employees to work from home and decide their own working hours. Another example of agile working might be workspaces designed to suit the different kinds of work taking place. This is an environment that helps people to be at their best and most productive. An agile workspace might include open areas with small tables for people to gather and work together and standing desks to improve energy levels and productivity. It might include quiet zones for a bit of thinking time and social areas for staff to chat and relax together. Like most things with agile working, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Agile workspaces have to be adapted to the individuals and their roles in the company because agile working is about valuing people and their activities and not having them limited by the physical workplace.

Basically, agile working is about being ready to change the way we work – whether it be our working hours, our physical workplace, the technology we use, the nature of our roles and the way we work together, or the way our work is done. By encouraging such agility and flexibility, we can adapt to the ever-changing world around us, while creating a more dynamic workforce and improving our performance and productivity.

## Tasks

### Task 1

Choose one to three correct answers for each question.

1. In more traditional workplaces, employees are expected to ...
  - a. have fixed working hours.
  - b. attend meetings at weekends.
  - c. be present at the office.
  - d. look as if they're always busy.
  
2. More and more people are working outside their normal working hours because ...
  - a. they want to show that they are always busy.
  - b. they work virtually with colleagues in different time zones.
  - c. they have the technology to work from home.
  - d. they work too slowly in the office.
  
3. The role of the agile manager is to ...
  - a. make sure their employees understand their roles and their goals.
  - b. watch what their employees are doing closely.
  - c. help their employees adapt to the different projects and teams.
  - d. tell their team members exactly what to do.
  
4. Organisations that adopt agile working approaches ...
  - a. allow their employees flexible working hours.
  - b. allow workers to choose where they prefer to work from.
  - c. are good at adapting to change.
  - d. insist that employees work from their own desks.
  
5. Agile workspaces ...
  - a. all have a similar design.
  - b. encourage employees to stand at their desks.
  - c. must have social spaces.
  - d. are all different, depending on the needs of their employees.

6. By working in an agile way, companies can ...
- improve performance.
  - increase productivity.
  - ensure that employees follow the rules.
  - focus on the people.

## Task 2

Complete the sentences.

employees	valuing	adapt	adopt
employers	enable	limiting	clarify

- Companies need to ..... to the changing world we live in.
- Companies should ..... agile approaches to find the most appropriate and efficient ways of working.
- Many ..... can now work from home.
- More agile ..... allow their workers more flexibility.
- One of the roles of the manager is to ..... goals and ..... collaboration.
- Agile working is about ..... people instead of ..... them.

## Discussion

What's your experience of agile working?

## Answers

### Preparation task

1. b
2. e
3. f
4. h
5. a
6. g
7. c
8. d

### Task 1

1. a, c, d
2. b, c
3. a, c
4. a, b, c
5. d
6. a, b, d

### Task 2

1. adapt
2. adopt
3. employees
4. employers
5. clarify | enable
6. valuing | limiting