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The Potential of Learning Agility
The relationship between Learning Agility and Success

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Introduction

In today's ever changing world, the importance of a dynamic workforce is on the forefront of every HR professional or selectors' mind. A company that has a workforce that can adapt quickly to new company policies, a new company direction, or company transforming based on the economic climate or competition from rivals, are the ones that will most likely survive! It boils down to one fundamental question: How can we ensure that these fluid individuals are easily found? Those who are both able to adapt to new situations and thrive in a changing environment.

As relevant as the topic is today, the idea is not that new. In a study conducted by McCall and Lombardo back in 1983, individuals who had recently been promoted to executive positions were investigated, specifically looking at those who failed in their new functions. The study illustrated people who have been given new responsibilities and a new environment to work in, but were failing to perform. The findings of this study showed that one of the reasons for this performance failure was due to the individual's overreliance on skills that got them promoted in the first place and not adapting to their new situations adequately. This relationship runs parallel with the example of a change in company direction or the complete transformation of a company, meaning people may be thrust into a new function or a combination of functions. Two decades later, Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) posited the idea of Learning Agility, which could accurately and objectively discover these fluid individuals.
Overtime, the concept of Learning Agility has also been linked to its efficiency in finding high potentials within a company. The findings of two studies suggest that the model was a faster and more objective means of discovering high potentials than the traditional method of using only performance (Dries, Vantilborgh, & Perpermans, 2012; De Meuse, Dai, Hallenbeck, & Tang, 2008). The problem of relying on performance only was that findings showed that 71% of high performers are not high potentials, but that 93% of high potentials are high performers (Corporate Leadership Council, 2005).

Learning Agility is the ideal tool for a selector to use, not only finding fluid and adaptable individuals, but also the ability to identify the high potentials. The focus of this article is to explain what Learning Agility is and how it is measured. HFMtalentindex introduced its Learning Agility assessment in 2014 and the database fosters research and case studies that illustrate the potential of using Learning Agility. Finally, this article discusses some compelling results relating to Learning Agility.

1. What is Learning Agility?

Learning Agility is the ability for someone to rapidly develop new effective behaviour based on new experiences and to easily move from idea to idea both within and across experiences. It is about the flexibility to approach situations from multiple perspectives and the speed of learning new things. This flexibility and speed means that people who are learning agile, have the ability to incorporate new skills into their current skill set quickly and efficiently, while at the same time unlearning ineffective skills with the same efficiency and speed (DaRue, Ashford, & Myers, 2012). It can also be said that those who are learning agile are not only problem solvers, they are also problem finders and are happy to tackle these problems head on (Hofkes & Busato, 2015). The importance of learning new skills and unlearning ineffective skills is apparent when linked back to the study conducted by McCall and Lombardo (1983), since overreliance on old skills could set someone up for failure.

2. Learning Agility Model

What determines whether someone is learning agile? Which personal characteristics contribute to this flexible and effective behaviour? Since the quest is about future unknown situations, we will mainly be interested in someone's potential for showing agile behaviour. Next to this, individuals who have shown effective agile behaviour in the past, are more likely to act upon these experiences again. Thus, the factors to look at relate to one's Personality, Motivations and Behaviour.

The personality factor provides insights into the character traits of an individual's behaviour, by asking the candidate to indicate how they would behave in certain situations. Using these character traits, the type of behaviour the individual displays in practice can be insinuated. The motivation factor focuses on what the individual wants in their work environment, such as the need for personal growth or the need to work with others. These insights provide an understanding of what drives the individual and moreover, what offers them the most satisfaction when working. These two are measured by the individual's self-report on the HFMtalentindex Big 5 personality measurement and the HFMtalentindex Quinn motivations test. Additionally, the HFMtalentindex behavioural questionnaire provides insight in the individual's behaviour in the workplace relating to Learning Agility. This can again be input from the individual him/herself, but a 360 degrees feedback approach is even more informative, collecting input from the individual's boss, colleagues, subordinates, or a combination of.

Learning agile behaviour can take several forms. Where one person proves to be effective in new situations because he's keen on experimenting different approaches, the other might thrive because she's intrigued by the new situation and happy to analyse it to the full extend. Learning Agility can thus be seen from different angles. Therefore, the Learning

Agility construct consists of four domains; Change Agility, Mental Agility, People Agility, and Results Agility; and one transcending factor, Self-awareness. These domains will be explained in more detail below.

Figure1: HFMtalentindex Performance Model
From potential to performance - Learning Agility as accelerator.

Learning Agility

Internal Catalysts
Motivations
Preferred roles
Interests

Potential
Intelligence
Personality

The development process

Performance
Skills
Behaviour
Knowledge
Experience

External Catalysts
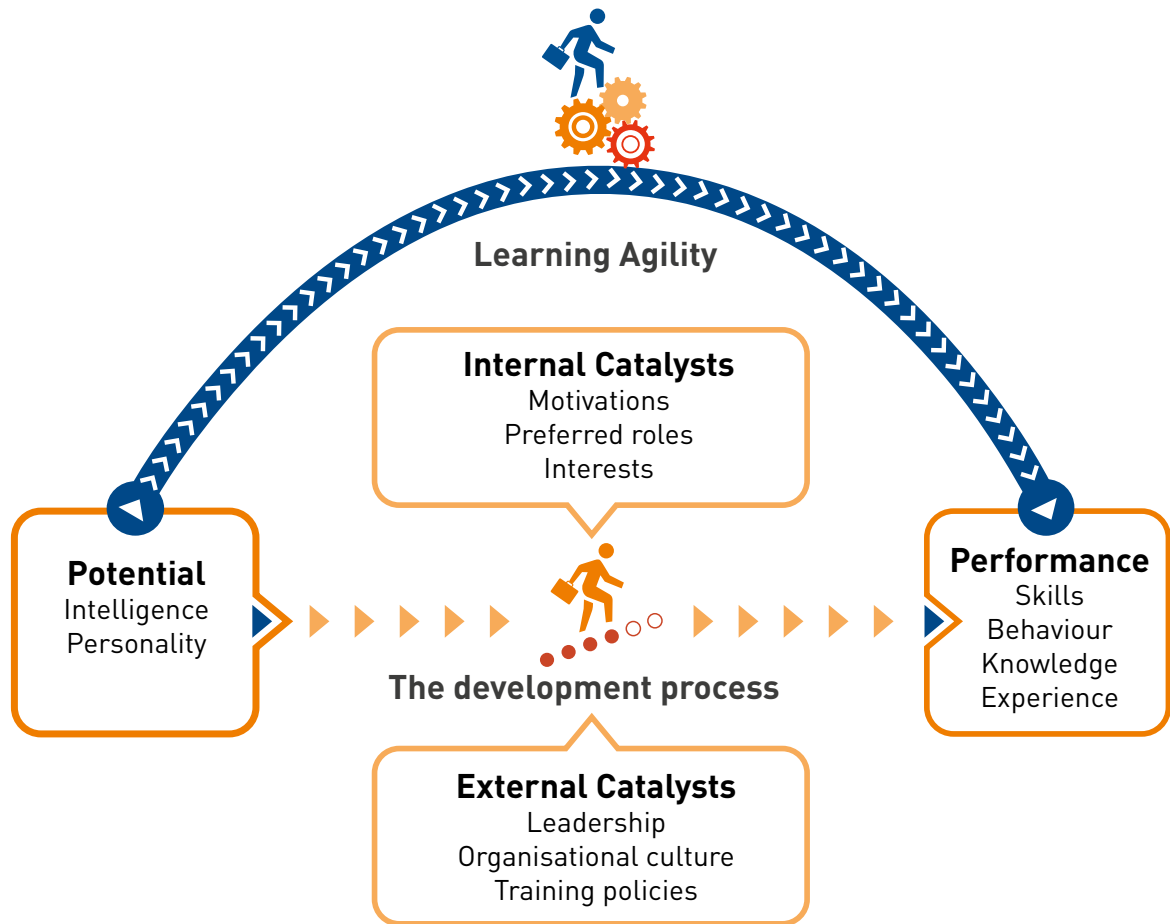Leadership
Organisational culture
Training policies

Figure 2: Learning Agility Construct & Learning Agility Factors

A constant curiosity, that is fuelled by new unknown things. Interest in experimenting, trying new things, and a passion for new experiences. They are able to learn best from their experiences.

Enjoy using new ideas to create new insights when things are complex or unclear. They like to analyse and are often able to get to the bottom of things in new ways, by thinking outside the box.

Are open to people with different backgrounds and opinions. A need to properly understand what others mean and take others opinions seriously. Succeed better in learning from the input of others.

Desire to be successful and always look for the best way to achieve results. Better able to set goals and retaining focus in new and unfamiliar situations.

Knowing their own strengths and weaknesses. Critical of their own performance and actions. Keen to know how they can do things better and willingness to learn.

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Self-awareness is considered a transcending factor because the ability to be aware of ones strengths and weaknesses and the willingness to both improve and learn, gives an individual an added bonus. This idea runs parallel with the idea of a growth mindset, which is the belief that one's talents and abilities can be fostered through putting an effort into learning and through practice (Dweck, 2009). Those who score high on Self-awareness are willing to put in the extra effort to improve and learn from their situations, thus strengthening their weaknesses and buttressing their strengths. They are not demotivated when encountering what is perceived as insurmountable obstacles. It is easy to imagine how this can positively influence how they utilise and improve on their agilities.

The other side of that coin is a fixed mindset, whereby someone believes that one's talent and abilities are fixed, with little room for improvement (Dweck, 2009). Those who score low on Self-awareness, are less focused on the idea that they have the ability to improve, thus reducing their awareness of the learning potential of the situation. This has an explicit blanket effect on the impact of the agilities.

Figure 3: *Special Position Self-awareness*
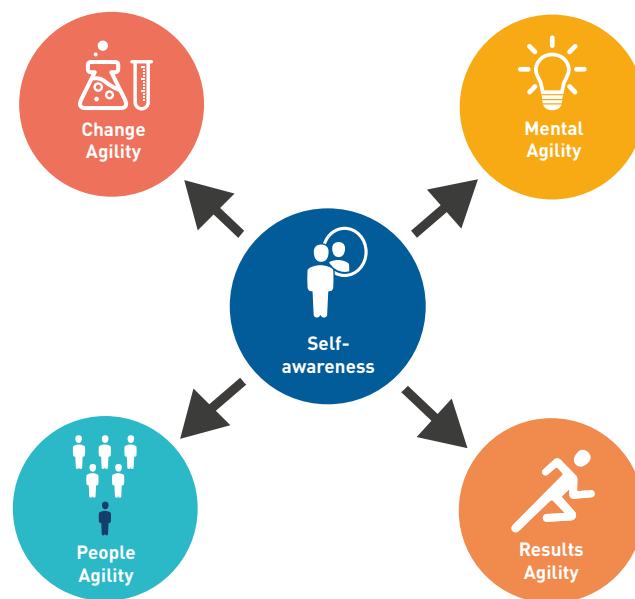
This should illustrate the importance for organisations to especially foster the development of Self-awareness. Literature shows that personality traits are relatively stable over time, which means that organisations can specifically target and stimulate an individual's motivation for personal growth, which is more malleable (Hofkes & Busato, 2015). This growth should lead to higher scores on the other four domains, which translates to a higher score on Learning Agility, ensuring that the individual learns new effective behaviour faster.

As mentioned, each domain and transcending factor is measured through the combination of Personality, Motivation and Behaviour. Let's take Change Agility for example, those who are Change Agile are driven by exploration and adventure. Whereas, those who are Mental Agile consist of those who show a high potential for imagination. Those who are People Agile are trusting and are driven to want to work together with others, whereas those who are Results Agile are driven to succeed in the work place. Lastly, those who are Self-aware are open to experiences and strive for personal growth. This can be seen as a general recipe for increasing effectiveness in known and unknown situations, since those individuals are more actively learning from their experiences. A more extensive review is conducted in an earlier article on Learning Agility by Hofkes and Busato (2015).

The overall Learning Agility is based on the four domains and the transcending factor, which means that each individual has a unique Learning Agility "profile" or learning "style". For instance, individual A scores high on Learning Agility because he heavily relies on his Change Agility, with a somewhat lower score on the other domains. Whereas, individual B, may be more balanced, scoring equally high on each domain and transcending factor. The question now may be, what is the ideal profile? Is overall Learning Agility alone most important? Or is one or a combination of domains more important for success? This question is addressed in the following section.

3. Learning Agility in Practice – Case Studies

Due to the growing interest in Learning Agility, many clients want to investigate the potential of using Learning Agility as an assessment tool. This has allowed HFMtalentindex to collect Learning Agility data from a wide variety of sources and to use that data to extensively investigate the relationship between Learning Agility and other concepts. What follows are a few examples of analyses that have been conducted for both clients as well as for internal use. Analyses that have been conducted for clients specifically, are based on data taken from that client's online system. Otherwise, the results are based on an anonymous data sample of over 17,000 people from a wide variety of HFMtalentindex's clients.

This section will focus on specific case studies that corroborate previous results and provides evidence of HFMtalentindex's Learning Agility assessment as an effective tool for selection and development. To be able to correctly interpret the research results that follow, it is important to understand that candidates are given a score between 1 and 9 on the Learning Agility assessment. As can be seen in figure 4, approximately 54% of the group will receive an average score (scores 4 to 6) compared to the norm group, with 23% scoring below average (score 1 to 3) and 23% scoring above average (7 to 9). In the graphs showing research results below, the score range can either present the full scale of scores 1 to 9 or part of the scale presented in more detail.

Figure 4: Bell Curve
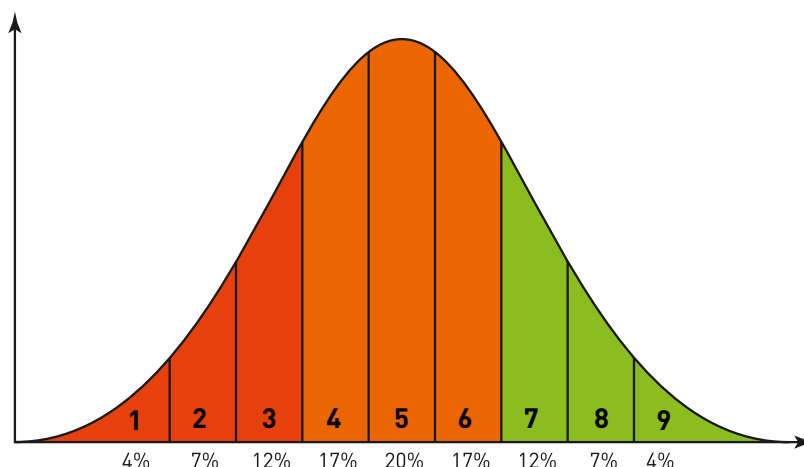
3.1 Learning Agility, Performance and High Potentials

One of the first research questions that comes to mind is about the relationship between Learning Agility and current performance. To answer this question, Learning Agility scores of individuals were analysed in relation to a 360 performance evaluation on competencies relevant to their current function. The type of performance evaluations spanned multiple different functions, ranging from consultants, sales managers, cashiers, accountants, secretaries, engineers to directors, thus ensuring a diverse data set. The evaluations dated from 2015 onwards, guaranteeing the data was current and representative of the current workforce. A correlation analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between Learning Agility and recent performance.

Figure 5: Relation Performance and Learning Agility
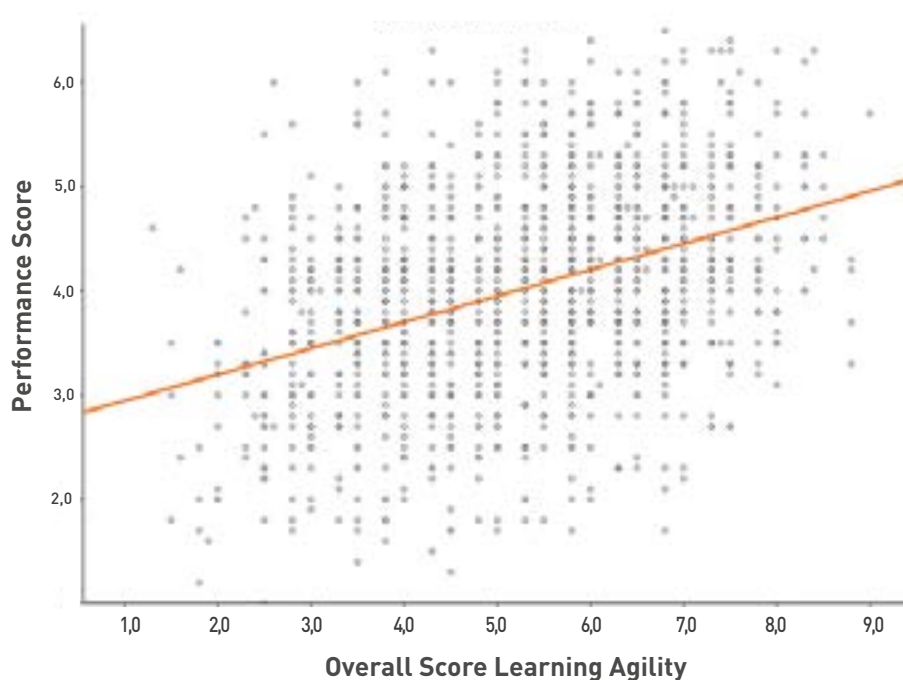
It was revealed that there was a strong positive correlation, 0.37, between Learning Agility and Performance. Those who score high on Learning Agility are more likely to have a higher performance score. Expanding on the analysis, the underlying factors of Learning Agility were also investigated in relation to performance, with Change and Results Agility being the two factors that correlated most strongly with performance; 0.34 and 0.38 respectively. The other factors were also found to be correlated with performance, but not as strongly.

The analysis was further refined to investigate the relationship between Learning Agility and Performance for those in a leadership position. This was indicated by a significant amount of leadership competencies within their profile of their 360 performance evaluation. The results are even more striking than the general analysis discussed above. The same relationship between Learning Agility and Performance was found. For overall Learning Agility, a correlation of 0.44 was found. Results Agility was shown to be most relevant for strong performance within this group, with a correlation of 0.52.

As noted, the used dataset was comprised of multiple different functions, relating to different education requirements. Therefore, it was important to control for education during the analysis. Irrespective of education level, the relationship described above was observed for Learning Agility and Performance. For more information about the relationship between education and Learning Agility, please refer to the paragraph titled "Education and Learning Agility".

As mentioned, Learning Agility was stated as being the best, most objective tool in finding high potentials (Dries et al., 2012; De Meuse et al., 2008) and HFMtalentindex found the same research evidence. A multinational cooperation wanted to investigate whether the link was there. Data was exported and three groups were created: a control group, a high potential group, and a senior management group. The high potential group consisted of people that had already been flagged as such by the client. A fourth group was introduced as an external control group, consisting of individuals from different client systems, but not including anyone from the specific client.

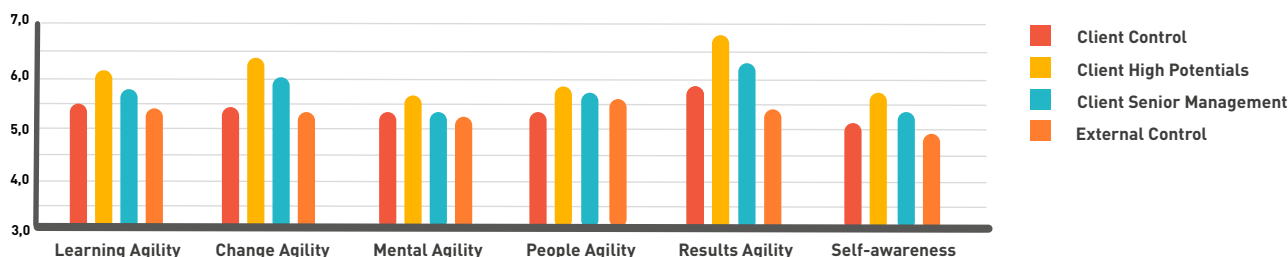*Figure 6:* *High Potentials and Learning Agility*

Figure 6 demonstrates that the high potentials of the client did indeed score higher on Learning Agility than the other three groups. What is also important to note is that they even scored higher than the Senior Management group in most cases!

Instead of flagging individuals as high potentials by evaluating them over an extended period of time, a simple assessment could be administered to measure the individual's Learning Agility. The relationship between those who are learning agile and being a high potential has been well documented and has been further cemented by this case study.

Using the results of this analysis in conjunction with what was found in the analysis looking at the relationship between Learning Agility and Performance, Learning Agility is not only able to find those who are more likely to be high potentials, additionally it finds those who most likely perform well in their current positions. These results may be loosely linked to what was found in the study conducted by the Corporate Leadership Council (2005). The results are promising, indicating a clear relationship between Learning Agility, performance, and High Potentials.

3.2 Learning Agility and Performance Over Time

The link between Learning Agility and current performance has been established, as illustrated in the previous paragraph, with those who are high on Learning Agility also performing well in their current position, while also further establishing the relationship between Learning Agility and high potentials.

However, what about the link between Learning Agility and someone's performance within the same function over time? Do those high on Learning Agility improve their performance within the same function, thus mastering the more demanding and complex jobs within their function? Are they able to learn and adapt, while ensuring that they strengthen their foothold within what they are currently doing? Do they do this more so, than those who score low on Learning Agility?

A data set was compiled containing individuals who had a 360 feedback performance evaluation of the same function at time 1 and at time 2 (usually a year later). Using this data set, a correlation analysis was conducted between Learning Agility and its domains against the change in performance over time. Even though the sample size was small, the results are promising. A high positive correlation was found between People Agility and Self-awareness on change in performance; 0.48 and 0.40 respectively. The analysis was taken a step further, looking at both intelligence and competencies separately in relation to change in performance over time. The results of which bolsters the efficacy of using Learning Agility as a tool, with a clearer relationship between Learning Agility and improvements in performance over time than the other two constructs.

The relationship between Self-awareness and the change in performance is self-evident, with those who are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, utilising that information to their benefit and more readily willing to accept feedback from others.

There was also the strong link with People Agility, indicating that those who learn best from others and seek other perspectives on how to tackle certain problems, are the ones who will improve their performance most over time.

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4. Compelling Results of Learning Agility

The following section contains analyses that were exploratory in nature, with the emphasis on discovering what type of relationships exist between Learning Agility and other concepts.

4.1 Education and Learning Agility

The relationship between the highest education level completed by the candidate and Learning Agility was investigated. As mentioned, the data set consists of HFMtalentindex's clients, which represents a diverse and international group. The education variable consisted of three levels: vocational education, higher vocational education, and university. There was a strong correlation between education completed and Learning Agility, with the strongest correlation between the education variable and overall Learning Agility (0.32). The other domains correlated highly with education level completed (range: 0.27 to 0.29), except for People Agility which is considered to be low (0.10).

The following graph was created to illustrate the relationship between education level completed and Learning Agility. The graph points to vocational education scoring as a group lowest on Learning Agility and its domains, while university scores highest.

Figure 7: Education Groups
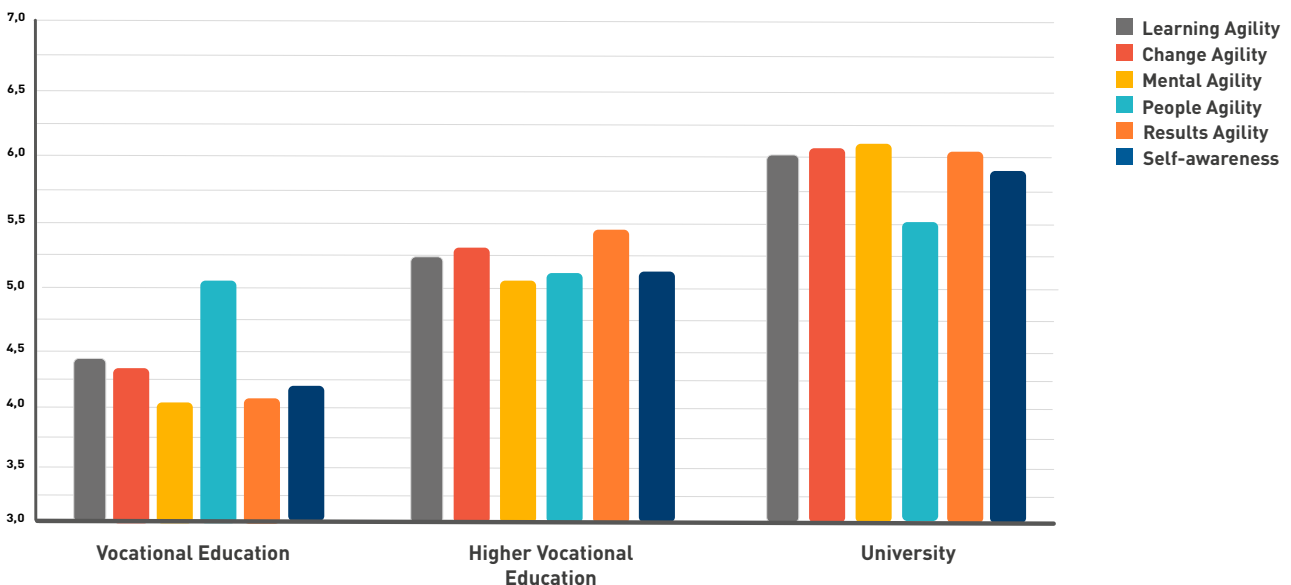
Whereas differences between groups are of general interest, more importantly, we would like to be able to differentiate between individuals within a specific group. Figure 8 illustrates that, within each education level, there is a diversity in Learning Agility scores. In other words, the HFMtalentindex Learning Agility assessment is able to separate the low and high scoring candidates, irrespective of education level completed.

Figure 8: *Education and Learning Agility*
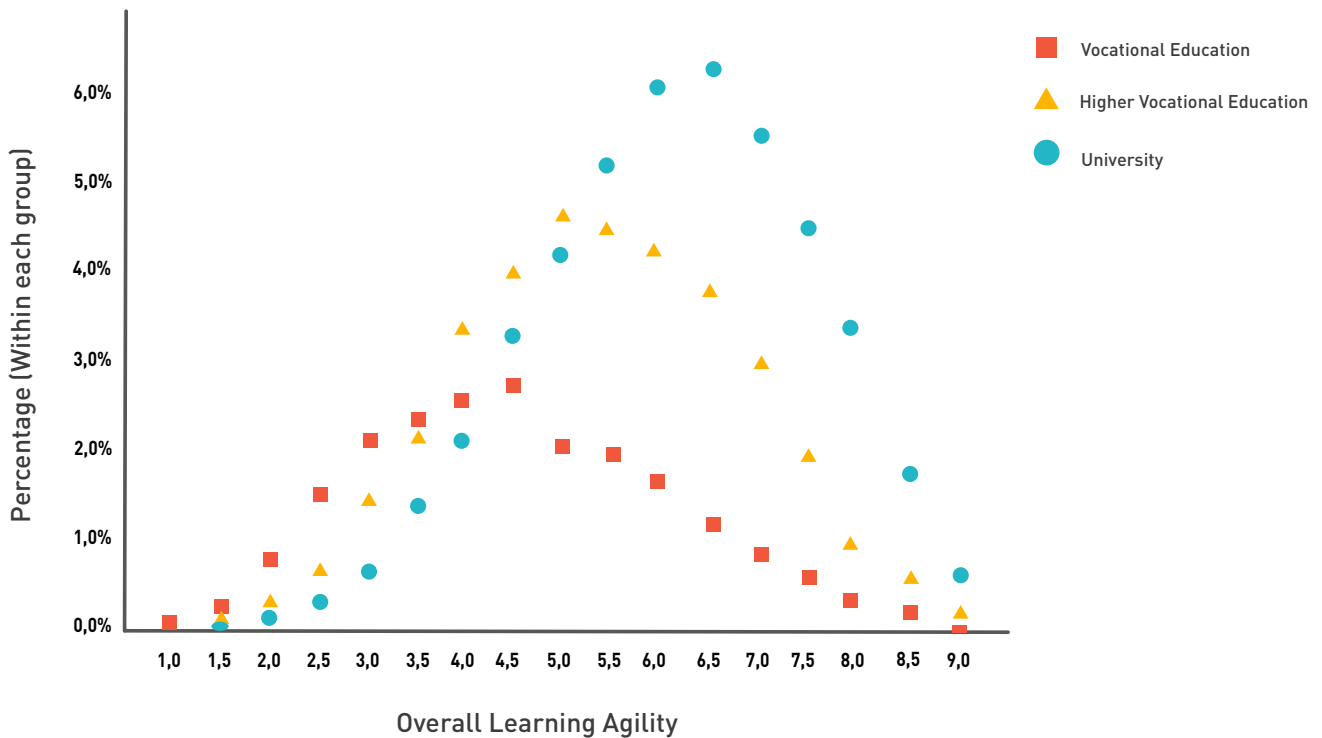
4.2 Age and Learning Agility

The link between Learning Agility and Age is an interesting one. What group differences can be seen between different cohorts of people from different generations? And could one cautiously hypothesise about outcomes of longitudinal studies investigating changes to individuals' Learning Agility profiles as they get older? The research results presented below are based on cohort analyses of people of distinct age groups.

Figure 9: *Age Groups*
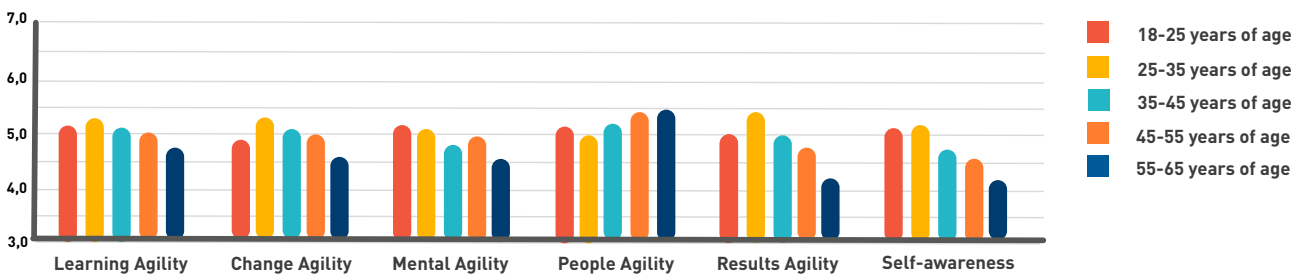
The data indicates two clear relationships between age and Learning Agility. In age groups after the age of 35, there is a steady decline in Learning Agility, Change Agility, Mental Agility, Results Agility and Self-awareness, with analysis indicating the influence

is strongest for Mental Agility, Results Agility and Self-awareness. There is a reversed relationship for People Agility, with the older age groups showing above average scores compared to the younger age groups.

What does this mean? It means that in the current population, 18 to 25 year olds are most balanced in relation to Learning Agility and its domains. The 25 to 35 year olds are also relatively balanced, but as a group rely more heavily on Results Agility to learn best from their experiences, which is corroborated by previous research (Hofkes & Busato, 2015). Striving for success seems to be the driving force of young people in the start of their careers. The older groups, namely 45 to 65 years of age, rely more heavily on People Agility when faced with new challenges in an unknown situation.

De Meuse et al. (2011) were also interested in age effects on Learning Agility. They concluded that the concept of Learning Agility was applicable to all age groups. They also investigated age differences, and concluded based on a homogeneous group of MBA students that there were no significant differences to be reported. However, their dataset was homogeneous, both in regards to background and (relatively young) age group. The analysis conducted here, is much more diverse. Thus the results expand on the current literature on Learning Agility and age.

4.3 Gender and Learning Agility

For many, this section would be considered a sensitive topic to broach. The data indicates a difference between men and women on a group level, on Learning Agility and its domains, with relatively small but significant differences. It can be concluded that on average, the two groups differ in their approach to learning. Again, as discussed before on the relation between education and Learning Agility: one will be interested in differences between individuals (selection) or in strengths and weaknesses in one's Learning Agility profile (development), and not so much in differences between groups.

Figure 10: *Gender Differences*

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Figure 11: *Gender and Learning Agility*
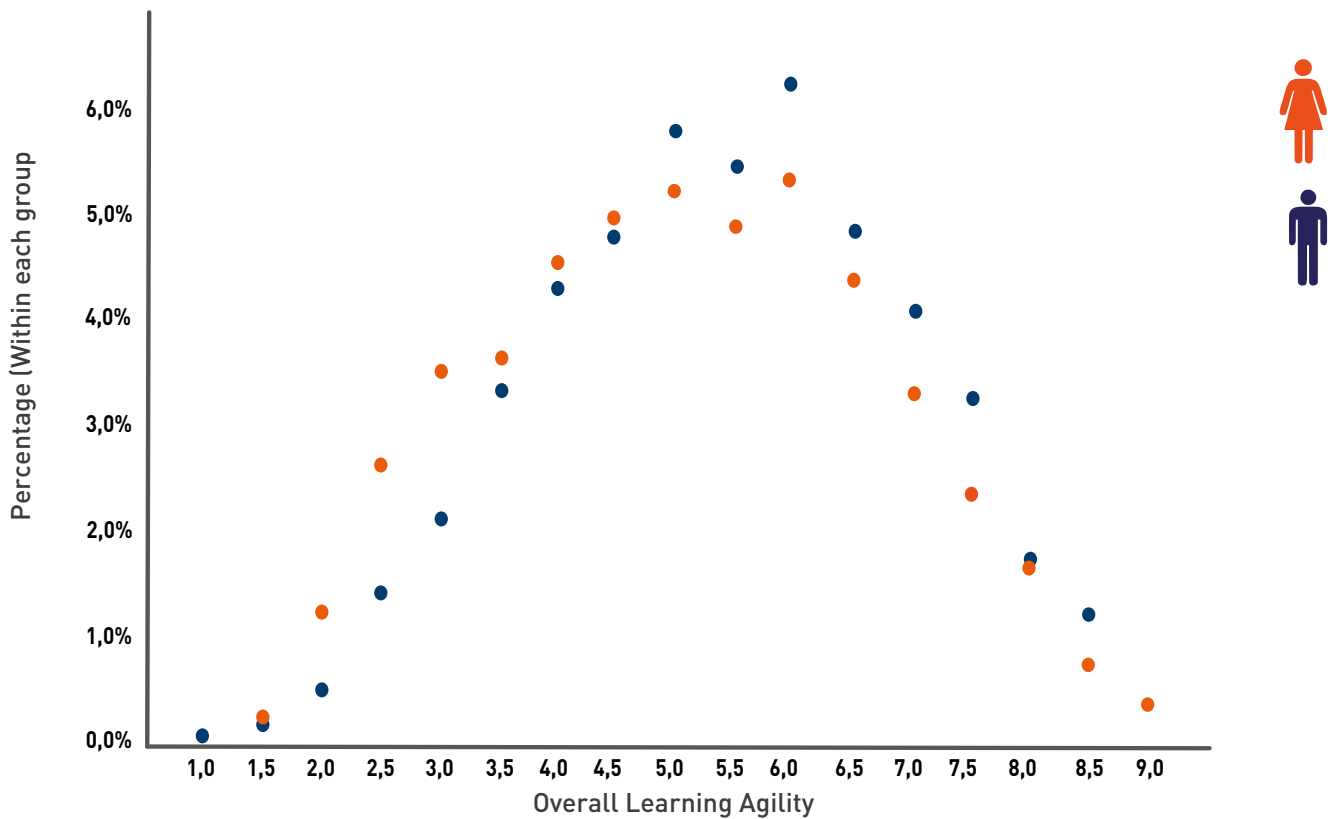
Men rely on Mental and Results Agility as their preferred method of learning. Thriving in environments that create complex and abstract tasks, which they achieve through being goal oriented and focusing on the task at hand. Men scoring higher on Mental Agility than women supports the findings found in earlier studies (De Meuse et al., 2011; Hofkes & Busato, 2015). This can also be found in literature which indicates that one of men's preferred method of learning is abstract conceptualization, which is the application of thought and logic to learning (Severiens & Dam, 1994). Concerning Results Agility, a similar effect has been found before by De Meuse et al. (2011), albeit more pronounced in this analysis.

Women on the other hand, are more People Agile, which is their preferred method of learning. Thriving in environments where they can work closely with others, learning from others, and trying to get outside perspectives by accumulating information by seeking others for advice and ideas. This finding is consistent with the literature, which has shown women to be more adept at interpersonal skills than men and to learn more from others (De Meuse, Dai, & Hallenbeck, 2010; Velsor & Hughes, 1990). In an earlier study, Self-awareness was shown to be more prominent with women than men (Hofkes & Busato, 2015). This is less pronounced in the current study, although a trend could definitely be observed.

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4.4 Learning Agility by Region

Looking into regional differences in Learning Agility allows one to investigate whether there are cultural differences related to Learning Agility. This was the first time regional differences was used as a variable in relation to Learning Agility, as a result there were no previous ideas on how the two would relate to each other. This exploratory analysis was conducted on HFMtalentindex's data that consisted of a diverse group of participants from different continents.

**Figure 12:** *International Differences in Relation to Learning Agility*
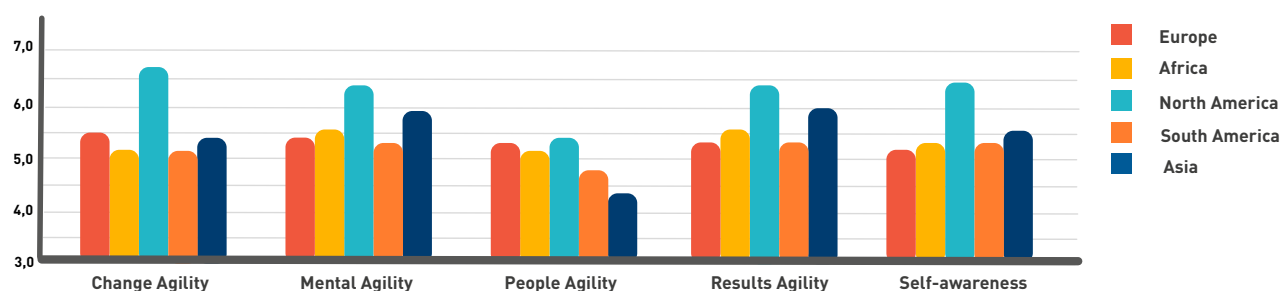
What is directly apparent from the graph is that North America as a group, performs very well on Learning Agility and its domains, with Change Agility the dominant learning me-thod for those candidates. The other group of interest is the Asian group, whose strengths are Mental and Results Agility, with a clear weakness in People Agility. Africa and South America do not seem to deviate from the European group as much as North America and Asia. A breakdown of the nationalities that fall under each group can be found within the footnote[1]. One might note from the graph that the overall average Learning Agility scores deviate slightly from the expected average of 5 in the norm group. This is attributed to the fact that the group investigated consists of mainly those who have completed a University education level, who score slightly above average compared to the Learning Agility norm group.

4.5 Sector Strengths

An investigation was conducted to look into how certain sectors scored on Learning Agility. The primary goal was to gain insights into what each sector's strength and weaknesses were on a group level, in relation to Learning Agility and the five domains.

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[1]*Europe: Northern, Southern, Eastern (Turkey included), and Western Europe. Africa: North, Central, South Africa. North America: North America. South America: South America. Asia: India, Asia, Asia other.*

Figure 13: *Organizational Branches*
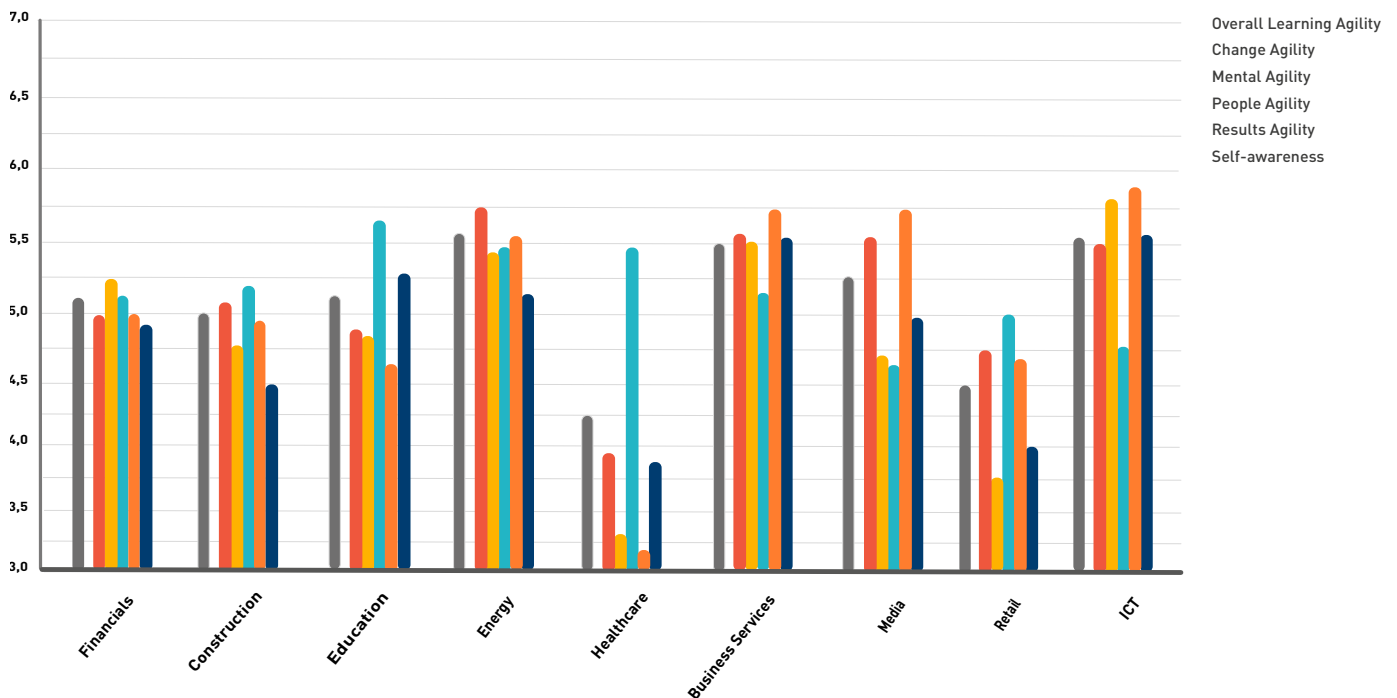
It is interesting to note that the strengths and weaknesses of certain sectors reflect what one would expect them to be. For instance, when looking at education and healthcare, the dominant strength in those sectors is People Agility, whereby people mostly learn by engaging with others and learning from them. In the ICT sectors, staff strengths are Mental Agility and Results Agility, meaning those who work in this sector, learn mostly from tackling abstract and complex problems in an orderly and focused manner.

These insights not only provide information on what to look for in people when hiring them, or how their sector would do in relation to a benchmark, additionally it may also guide selectors to strengthen certain attributes within their organisation that needs strengthening in relation to the benchmark.

4.6 Learning Agility Benchmarks

The usage of benchmarks can provide an unique point of view in relation to specific target groups and thereby providing more details to general trends observed. For example, one might be interested to assess a candidate's Learning Agility in comparison to his peers for a certain job level. This was one of the biographical questions that was collected within the large HFMtalentindex dataset. Learning Agility was investigated within three consecutive categories of increasing job level: Operational level (junior, medior and senior); Middle and Upper Management; and Executive Management level.

Figure 14: Job Levels
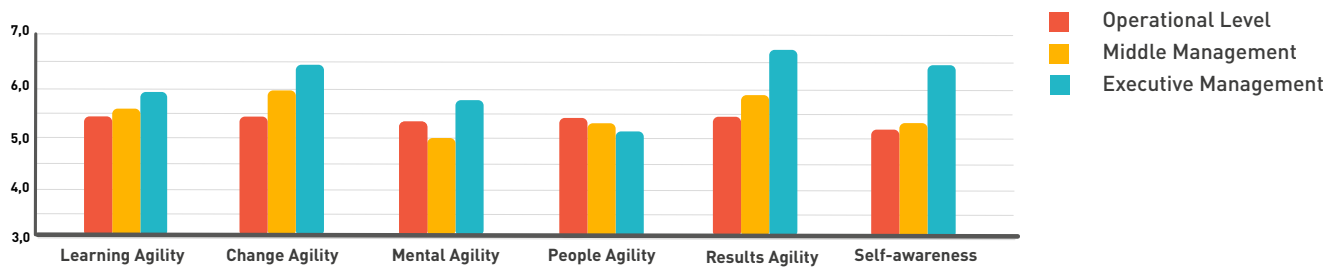
One of the results from the analysis is that people at an executive management level utilise Change and Results Agility. For the other job levels, no clear preferences were found. For executives, two relating factors come to mind. The perceived preferences apparently relate specifically to their achieved position and not to their age (63% of the executives were between the ages of 45 to 65). Those in the 45 to 65 year old age groups usually show People Agility as their preferred learning method. Also, the above average education level of the executives (67% completed university) does partially explain their overall high scores, but does not provide an explanation for the above average scores on Change and Results Agility. This example shows the usefulness of having a specific focus group.

Within a corporate setting, benchmarks can be targeted from any angle. For example, a leading multinational corporation wanted to investigate how their human resource business partners scored in relation to a benchmark, which was based on a benchmark of data collected specifically on a large target population of human resources officers. Based on the results, the client was able to see that on average, its business partners were very similar to the benchmark, so in striving for a leading HR population the organisation needed to upgrade the current group.

Another multinational organisation going through a major transformation had included multiple customisable variables in their online system, such as a country variable, a brand variable, and a managerial level variable. This allowed for an analysis to be conducted that could look into a combination of those three variables. Internally, this information is useful for the client, who is using both internal and external benchmarks to investigate how people from different countries and brands perform on Learning Agility based on their managerial level.

These examples illustrate the potential of using a Learning Agility benchmark to compare one's company, business unit, or group to and further allowing for organisations to investigate their preparedness for the future. Not only that, the descriptive information can also provide insights into areas that need improvement, so that when selecting new candidates, selectors can strengthen any perceived weaknesses.

Conclusion

An individual that can effectively tackle problems in new situations or environments is the ideal candidate for any selector and is key to development. The ability to adapt one's behaviour by learning new skills and forgetting old ones that are no longer relevant, is the most important commodity in the workforce. The Learning Agility assessment is able to find these people using a validated model, which is based on the individual's personality, their motivations within the workplace, and for a clearer developmental picture, evaluating their present behaviours in a work environment.

The model was first posited by Lombardo and Eichinger (2000), influenced by the research that was conducted by McCall and Lombardo (1983), which investigated why individuals fail to perform in their new functions. One of the main reasons cited by McCall and Lombardo was the fact that individuals heavily relied on their old skills that made them so successful, not all of which were applicable in their new functions. This can be easily remedied by finding Learning Agile individuals. Not only that, the concept of Learning Agility was also attributed to accurately finding High Potentials (Dries et al., 2012; De Meuse et al., 2008).

Delving into case studies and creating a Learning Agility data set based on 17,000 recently assessed people within HFMtalentindex's clients, not only were these findings corroborated, emphasising the successful implementation of HFMtalentindex's Learning Agility model, but other interesting facts in relation to Learning Agility were found.

Based on the case study, High Potentials are those who are most Learning Agile. On top of that, those who are Learning Agile are also most likely to perform well in their current function, with the driving force being Change Agility and Results Agility, as supported by the correlational study between performance and Learning Agility. Not only that, it was found that People Agility and Self-awareness are two factors that contributed most to an increase in performance score for an individual's current function over time.

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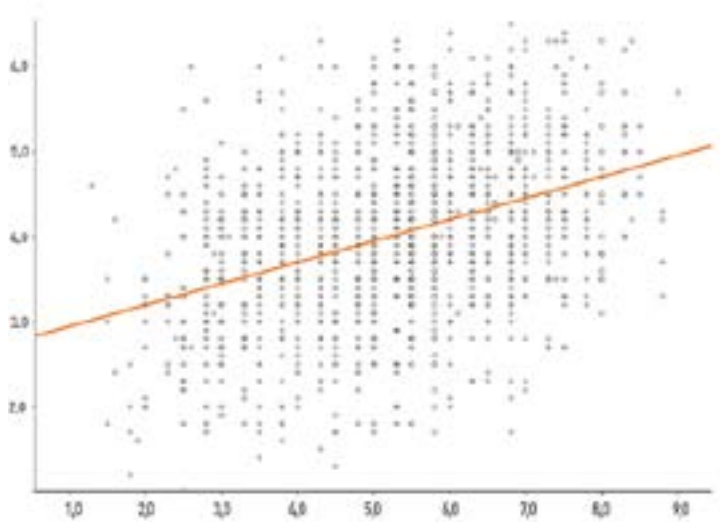
These findings, taken together, emphasise the importance of overall Learning Agility, since the combination of domains ensure not only the success of an individual in their current function, but also the ensured future improvement in that function over time.

The data demonstrates a fascinating relationship between age groups and Learning Agility, with those who are currently 25 to 35 dependent on Results Agility, whereas those who are 45 to 65 more reliant on People Agility. This finding expands on current literature of Learning Agility. Education on the other hand has a strong positive linear relationship with Learning Agility and its domains, while at the same time recognising that within each group one can find the most Learning Agile individuals.

The potential of using HFMtalentindex's Learning Agility is limitless, enabling us to conduct different types of analyses while using our extensive database, as illustrated by the bench-mark examples.

For more information about Learning Agility or the possibilities of HFMtalentindex, please visit us at *www.hfmtalentindex.com*.

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