smart**CIO**

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Digital Agility in Action
Business Continuity at Scale

Agility in the Agricultural Sector

In-Kyung Choi
CIO, Harim Group

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CIO at Everise

Preparing for Unforeseen Business Changes

Foreword

Last year's global pandemic changed the world dramatically. Social distancing not only curtailed everyday human interaction but changed the nature of work, with increasing numbers of employees logging into the office remotely. From a business perspective, many realized operations simply weren't agile enough to adapt to the new environment.

It's an environment that will be with us, no matter the region we operate in, for a while to come. And one that highlights the important role of future IT planning for the CIO.

Issue four of Smart CIO looks at agility in action and the importance of strong leadership to drive digital acceleration. As we discovered in the IDC Workday Digital Agility Study, few companies in the Asia Pacific region fully comprehend what needs to be done to create an agile organization. This lack of understanding is problematic since the future is described as "survival of the most agile".

Kok Ping Soon, Chief Executive at GovTech Singapore, shares his ideas around a digital government ultimately being an agile one. He describes the Singapore Government's push to increase the pace of digitalization within the context of "H.E.M." – Humanize frontend services, Engage the community and Modernize infrastructure.

Looking to Australia we speak to former Flinders University CIO, Kerrie Campbell, and discover agility is alive and well on campus. Kerrie believes an agile IT system guided by a customer-centric approach is key to creating an organization adept at handling sudden change.

In another guest article, In-Kyung Choi, CIO for South Korea's Harim Group, discusses his approach to agility in the agricultural sector. For him, agility requires visibility and readiness – if you prepare well in advance you can solve a problem with the least amount of effort and strengthen business continuity. Our regular cybersecurity columnist, Bryce Boland, offers agility tips on how to prepare an organization for the unexpected. A growth mindset, learning from failure and a relentless focus on the essential, create an agile environment that can quickly adapt.

Finally, Everise CIO, Ganapathy Subramaniyan, has always understood the importance of agile solutions. This attitude, and a people-first philosophy, was the reason the BPO business was prepared for unforeseen business challenges.

Digital acceleration is the key learning for CIOs going into 2021 – to always be on and always be secure. Agility is the ability to change and adjust things on the fly as the situation demands, while also empowering the employee experience in a pandemic and post-pandemic world.

Rob Wells
President, Asia,
Workday

Contents at a Glance

A digital government is an agile government

By Kok Ping Soon, Chief Executive, GovTech Singapore

As our healthcare frontline workers mounted a medical response when COVID-19 hit our shores in January, the Singapore Government was concurrently launching a technological response – far broader and deeper than what we did for SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003.

Compared to SARS in 2003, when communication channels were largely driven by broadcast news and radio, we now have agile digital platforms to push out information quickly; channels such as the Gov.Sg WhatsApp channel and the COVID-19 Chatbot have provided the public with timely daily updates on the pandemic.

We also launched digital platforms for citizens to get personalized and granular information – ranging from where they can collect their masks (MaskGoWhere), to what financial support they can get (SupportGoWhere), to the crowd level at places of interest (SpaceOut). The largely manual contact tracing regime used during SARS is now augmented with digital tools, such as the TraceTogether smartphone app and SafeEntry national digital check-in system, to improve the accuracy and speed of identifying close contacts.

COVID-19 has demonstrated the importance of investing in agile digital capabilities. Over the past few years since the launch of the Smart Nation initiative in 2014, we have established a nationwide fibre infrastructure, nurtured a vibrant tech ecosystem, and also invested in building technology expertise and tools within Government agencies. These investments have started to bear fruit, and have allowed Government agencies to react to and manage the pandemic more effectively. These systems have meant our responses are timely, targeted and effective – especially in the face of unexpected events.

Chief Executive at GovTech Singapore, Kok Ping Soon, heads up the agency driving Singapore's Smart Nation initiative and public sector digital transformation.
His resume includes a variety of different Government posts including the Ministry of Manpower, National Security Coordination Secretariat, Ministry of Trade & Industry and Singapore Tourism Board.

The new possible: Singapore's digital landscape

During this COVID-19 period, our businesses and citizens are taking to digital tools at an unprecedented pace. Companies – that did not imagine remote work was possible – are now operating with majority of their workers tele-commuting. Our workforce, and even our seniors, are now experts at conducting meetings via Zoom, WebEx and Skype. Use of SafeEntry is now a staple for everyone, with over two million users checking in/out on a daily basis and more than 1.1 million people are now receiving their latest COVID-19 updates via the Gov.Sg WhatsApp channel.

These changes happened virtually overnight. A McKinsey study found that consumer and business digital adoption has vaulted five years forward in a matter of eight weeks. Without the right technology infrastructure in place this vast digital transformation would not have been possible.

With the gradual re-opening of Singapore's economy into a post-COVID-19 world, we will accelerate investments to empower citizens and businesses with more digitally-enabled possibilities.

As the implementing agency for the Digital Government Blueprint, GovTech Singapore will increase the pace of digitalization in government by Humanizing our frontend services, Engaging our community, and Modernizing Government infrastructure to "H.E.M." in the digitalization gains from COVID-19 – to create a more digitally empowered nation.

Creating a digitally empowered nation

"HEM-ming" in the new possibilities

Firstly, we aim to **humanize** our frontend services to create a more unified and pleasant experience when citizens transact with the Government.

We have made good progress in making our government digital services more user-centric. Citizens and Businesses' satisfaction with government digital services has improved by eight percentage points in 2019 to reach 86% and 77% respectively – an all-time high since 2012.

This year, we will be making an even bigger push in humanizing our services as more service-journey projects transit from design and development to minimum viable products (MVPs). Over $118 million of projected ICT contracts in this FY is earmarked to develop better citizen and business facing applications. The old "Moments of Life" app will undergo a product refresh. Renamed LifeSG it will evolve into a go-to app for all things related to the government in a citizen's life in Singapore, such as birth, graduation, and marriage.

For businesses, the GoBusiness portal will evolve into a key platform for business-related transactions with the Government – to help companies start a business, grow a business, and to apply for a licence. With information conveniently available from smartphones and laptops, we aspire to let citizens continue to transact and run errands as per usual, while reducing the frequency of in-person appointments.

Citizen-centric digital services will also become more pervasive. Beyond using SingPass to log in

to government services and now for SafeEntry check-in, users can look forward to more value-added services such as using SingPass Mobile for digital signing of documents and biometric login.

Second, we will **engage the community** in partnership to co-create and drive adoption in the usage of digital solutions. COVID-19 has shown us that no one has the monopoly on wisdom to deal with a national crisis; we are only as strong as our ability to work together.

In May, we conducted a COVID-19 Idea Sprint, which attracted over 300 participants who suggested more than 70 proposals – with ideas ranging from designing wearables for contact tracing to developing personal risk scores based on proximity data.

To fortify our engagement with the technology community, we have soft-launched a new Singapore Government Developer Portal. This is a centralized resource to help industry and developers learn more about our tech products. Developers, suppliers and industry partners will be able to find key information on product features, use cases and technical specifications to co-create solutions with us.

Finally, we will continue to **modernize Government infrastructure**. We will speed up the migration of Government ICT systems onto the Government Commercial Cloud.

> **"Companies – that did not imagine remote work was possible – are now operating with majority of their workers tele-commuting. Our workforce, and even our seniors, are now experts at conducting meetings via Zoom, WebEx and Skype."**

More applications will be re-platformed and re-factored to leverage cloud native services to increase their agility and scalability. We will also invest aggressively in data analytics, artificial intelligence and sensor projects to enable data-driven decision making in improving services and operational effectiveness.

We will also spend $300 million to design, implement and operate a new software-defined Government Wide Area Network to support increased computing needs, and another $300 million to strengthen the Government's cybersecurity posture with automated system reviews, cybersecurity monitoring and digital forensics capabilities.

Engineering digital government, making lives better

To support these plans, we will deepen our engineering capabilities within GovTech. We are hiring over 400 engineers in software development, cybersecurity, data analytics and infrastructure to augment our current engineering workforce of 2,200.

As I often share with my colleagues, GovTech's purpose in "Engineering Digital Government" so as to "Make Lives Better" has never been stronger. We will strive to push Singapore to be at the forefront of digital technology, and as one people, weather this storm together.

Government cannot predict the future but it needs to be prepared for unexpected events. Agility is the key to manage the unforeseeable. The key to Government agility is digital transformation across the sectors that interact with people's lives. Embracing digital solutions creates better outcomes for all.

Agility on campus: How CIOs respond to students and disruption

Kerrie Campbell, former CIO at Flinders University in Australia

Digital transformation at universities is being driven by students. To successfully navigate these changes CIOs need a customer-centric view and agile technology.

The higher education sector is being disrupted, especially on university campuses. The role of technology at universities has changed dramatically over the years, and is changing the way they operate. Essentially large organizations with many departments and products – change is being driven by the students, rather than the Board. It's not just student demands though – unforeseen events, like a global pandemic, means an agile technology framework is vital.

"There are academics, researchers and a corporate system we look after, but IT is really being driven by the students because they're digital natives," says Kerrie Campbell, former CIO at Flinders University in Australia. "During COVID-19, IT came to the fore and we were able to effectively move all our teaching online in a very short space of time, as well as enable more effective use of collaborative teaching tools, embed digital ways of communicating and meeting across the University to enable the continuation of all projects, meetings and the functioning of the University."

An agile system guided by the customer-centric view isn't confined to the higher education sector. It's something every CIO needs to take into consideration.

Understanding the customer view

When it comes to customer data, universities are in a unique position. Just look at the student

"As a CIO you need a clear vision on how an agile organization looks. Then you need to tell this story in a way that engages the organization, and you keep telling that story."

data collected; everything from location and attendance to logins and tracking of coursework completion.

"We're moving away from the data warehouse to a data lake that can give us a complete view of a student, an academic and the university as a whole," says Ms Campbell. "I've changed the model at Flinders University so that we have cross-skilled and cross-functional teams that are aligned to customers. I empower those staff to take control of projects based on their customer insights. In that sense, I'm a really unusual CIO."

Ms Campbell has been working in the IT sector for 35 years (as well as a stint as a part-time DJ). Previous to higher education, she worked in the banking and federal government sectors. She describes IT as "literally 60 guys and me for a long time". This lack of diversity helped her become an "unusual CIO" as she could bring a new perspective to IT.

"I was always searching for ways that I could influence change," she says. "I think I'm a bit of a change agent and a bit of a futurist. To be a CIO you don't have to come from a deep tech background."

A customer-centric education

"The future of the role is one that better understands business and customer needs."

For Ms Campbell, understanding what the customer wants is the key to success as a CIO. Unfortunately, this isn't always easy – especially when the departments themselves aren't sure what their customers want.

"Student services were convinced the enrolment process was terrible and the biggest issue facing students," says Ms Campbell. "We went and asked students. They actually wanted scooters to get around campus because Flinders is very hilly. Enrolments were down at number 20 or 30 [on the list]. Students were okay with the enrolment process but the department thought it was number one because they think it's number one. They never asked."

Scooters are one thing, but data-driven IT projects are making a big difference when it comes to reducing student attrition. Dropouts usually occur in the first few weeks of a semester. But analytics are enabling the university to determine which students are struggling and intervene.

"We check students are logging in and going to classes because we find that in the first three weeks if they don't have that active engagement they're highly likely to attrite," says Ms Campbell. "Quitting is a lost opportunity because we want students to go out and change the world."

Former CIO at Adelaide's Flinders University, Kerrie Campbell's experience covers the Government, utilities and banking sectors. With 30 years IT experience, Ms Campbell was recently voted Vice President of the Council of Australian Directors of Information Technology (CAUDIT) Executive Committee.

Agile adoption

Understanding customers is one thing, but they won't be able to guide you when unexpected events cause widespread disruption. The two factors combined need to be considered when implementing digital transformation across the organization.

"We had already invested a large amount of time and effort in creating an agile culture not only in IT but right across the University over the last three years," explains Ms Campbell. "I believe this enabled the organization to move and pivot quickly during the crisis. This type of thinking and the agile and iterative culture that we have built across the organization will be critical to the success of the organization moving forward."

Buy in and trust across all levels of the organization is essential. And when a crisis does occur the value of IT investment is clear.

"The team was energized by the pandemic crisis and anecdotally increased their productivity by 40% during this time," says Ms Campbell. "I have spoken to many other CIOs across different sectors and they were amazed at how quickly things we able to be pushed through. Prior, we would have to have had to go through months of committees."

Defining value

Looking at the demographics in any university you see academic experts nearing retirement and fresh-faced students just out of high school. The broader business

community is entering a phase where five generations are now working together. This means any CIO needs to manage different and sometimes opposing, values and expectations.

"I've always been really keen on the visualization of the work," says Ms Campbell. "It's about being vulnerable, because the business just used to see IT as a black box that was really expensive. It delivered some projects, not exactly what they wanted, and took a long time. That's why you need to expose what you're doing, show them the processes that you're going through and involve them in the process."

Understanding why a project is being done is just one step. Stakeholders, no matter their generation, need to understand value. This isn't just financial value either. Ms Campbell believes in widening the view beyond money to include outcomes-based value.

"You've got to show them felt value," she says. "We're bringing in business value, not just financial value. You can look at a bottom line of a spreadsheet but that doesn't tell you we've produced ten people who have gone into cancer research and we're closer to a cure."

Having a wider vision is also crucial to introduce agility principles into IT's scope. Generally employees fear change so you need to explain concepts and take them on the journey.

Students are digital natives

"As a CIO you need a clear vision on how an agile organization looks. Then you need to tell this story in a way that engages the organization, and you keep telling that story. To get people to change, you need to take the fear out of change, so for me training is vitally important," says Ms Campbell.

CIOs enable innovation
IT can't be relegated to the back room, you need to keep devices connected and data warehoused if it is to deliver value. The role of the CIO and IT is more creative in nature – that's how true innovation and agile reaction occurs.

"Today, you can outsource old IT jobs to cloud providers," says Ms Campbell. "IT needs to stop doing the lights on and tool stuff. We need to bring ourselves to the table as innovation enablers. We need

to work with the academics, the students, and the researchers, to do truly innovative things."

A 24-hour tutoring service powered by AI bots and virtual collaboration are just some of the innovations Ms Campbell envisions. For these innovations to be realised, university boards need to embrace disruption and broaden their sense of value.

"Universities love building buildings because they can see it, touch it and smell it," she says. "Look how much we spent money on this beautiful landscape or campus. Okay, that's great. But students want to be online. If I could get 10% of the University building spend in IT, the transformation would be utterly incredible. Just 10%."

Digital agility in Asia Pacific:
Is it understood?

Lawrence Cheok, Senior Research Manager at IDC

In the ever-evolving business climate that we now find ourselves in, organizations from across many different industries are undergoing major digital transformations. However, despite these rapid changes taking place, few companies in the Asia Pacific region completely understand what needs to be done to ensure they are digitally agile.

That was the finding of a survey recently conducted by Workday, in partnership with global market intelligence firm IDC. The Digital Agility Study APAC 2020, which interviewed 814 businesses across the Asia Pacific region, sought to learn how companies were being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they can address other crises in the future. The study aims to recommend actions to companies to help them to become more agile and resilient for the next normal.

As Senior Research Manager at IDC, Lawrence Cheok leads the marketing intelligence group's Asia/Pacific Digital Commerce and Marketing research team. With a focus on digital transformation (DX) he analyses market trends, competitive landscape and the latest technology impacting the DX process.

What is holding digital agility back?

Digital agility is the ability of an organization to respond to and thrive amid market disruptions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for businesses to accelerate digital transformation efforts to raise organizational agility as they shift focus from crisis management to recovery and growth. Of the companies interviewed for the survey, more than three quarters said they had been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Just 5% said they had seen no impact at all, and another 20% see it as an opportunity to become more digitally agile.

The survey found that for many organizations within Asia Pacific, COVID-19 is a case in point that enterprises need to do more in digital agility. When it came to structural agility, 75% of companies said they struggled to realign their organization's structures in response to

COVID-19, while 79% admitted they had difficulties updating their financial plans and forecasts in response to the changes in the business environment brought about by the pandemic.

"What is holding the region back is in the areas of processes and technology," said Lawrence Cheok, Senior Research Manager at IDC. "What you have is digital transformation taking place at the tactical level, but these initiatives have not been integrated and embedded enterprise-wide for true organizational agility."

However, Cheok added that the situation is improving and that more business leaders in the region were beginning to recognize the importance of integrating technology and processes across all aspects of the business. In

terms of organizational structures and culture, 56% of organizations have established a centralized office of digital transformation, and 28% of organizations' digital initiatives are integrated and coordinated at the enterprise level.

"Asia Pacific organizations must advance digital agility from tactical efforts to integrated ones. The entire organization must be aligned on the digital transformation journey that it must take," Cheok said.

The stages of agility

Based on the study, IDC developed the Digital Agility Index (DAI) to understand the digital agility of Asia Pacific organizations. It comprises four stages of maturity around four key dimensions: organization and culture, people and capabilities, processes and

Figure 1: **The Digital Agility Journey: Stages and Dimensions**

	Slow (Titanic)	Tactical (Speed Boats)	Integrated (Mothership)	Agile (Digital Armada)
Organization and culture	Opaque monolithic structures	Standalone digital teams and initiatives	A centralised digital leadership team with top-down decision-making	Part acts autonomously and yet remain synchronous to the extended organization
People and capabilities	Lack of digital savviness	Digital skills are limited to those on board the speed boats	Digital skills and talents proliferating but limited incross-functional awareness	Crew is digitally skilled and digitally aware of the bigger organization and environmental context
Processes and governance	Lack insights and foresight about business and/or market environment	Tactical insights that are disconnected from extended organization	Shared data, measurements, and insights with automations	Processes are fueled by shared data and predictive intelligence
Technology	Burdened by legacy technologies	Islands of technology innovations with care still in legacy environment	Integrated digital technologies	A single autonomous digital platform
	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4

governance, and technologies. The four stages to an organization becoming digitally agile are (see Figure 1):

1. Slow, companies that have an opaque monolithic structure, technologies, and processes; and are slow to change course like the Titanic.

2. Tactical, companies have been experimenting with standalone digital initiatives and teams. Like speed boats, these initiatives are fast and responsive to market changes. However, they are disconnected in technology and processes from the larger enterprise that still operates in a business-as-usual mode.

3. Integrated, companies have established a central digital leadership team that has a digital mindset and to govern digital initiatives and investments. The organization is operated over integrated processes and technologies. However, responsiveness is lagging due to the top-down decision-making processes and lack of real-time closed-looped intelligence.

4. Agile, where parts of the organization are empowered to course-correct autonomously following market changes, and concurrently remain in sync with the rest of the company in terms of strategic objectives. Such agility traits are enabled self-healing processes running over a single

autonomous digital platform fueled by shared data and intelligence.

The study found that 42% of organizations in Asia Pacific are Tactical, followed by 38%, which are Slow. Of the companies surveyed, 18% are considered Integrated, while just 2% are Agile (see Figure 2).

In the region, companies in Singapore, New Zealand and Australia lead when it comes to digital agility, while those in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia fall behind (see Figure 3).

The report found that many organizations' processes fall behind market dynamics, and the lack of integrated technology hinders the

Figure 2: **Digital Agility in Asia/Pacific**
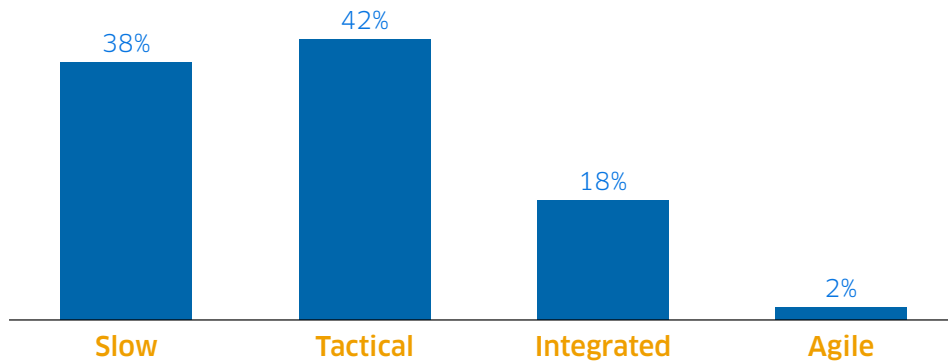
ability of information to be shared in a timely manner, and for reactive actions to be made. In order to improve their digital agility journeys, companies within the region must ensure that process, governance and technology are better integrated, the report found.

For example, in terms of process and governance, many companies' core processes may be automated, but they are limited at the functional or departmental level. Some functions may have levels of alignment between them, but these are not typically well integrated. In addition, for many companies decision-making processes are based on lagging indicators, limiting their responsiveness to changing market dynamics.

One of the ways in which these agility shortfalls manifest themselves is as digital transformation challenges. When asked about the top challenges that the C-suite face in their organization's digital transformation journey, three

common threads emerged. They are challenges in legacy processes, the lack of the right technologies, and inter-departmental collaborations.

The benefits of agility

The benefits of being an agile organization were clear in the study (see Figure 3). Of the agile organizations interviewed, more than two-thirds reported an extensive use of digital technologies and processes as they executed their business continuity

plans with a remote workforce during COVID-19. In addition, more than half of agile organizations adapted quickly in their business processes, while 67% said they were able to adjust and roll out their financial plans and forecast across the organization faster.

Cheok said that while the COVID-19 pandemic had created difficulties for many companies within the Asia Pacific region, it had also led to opportunities too, especially

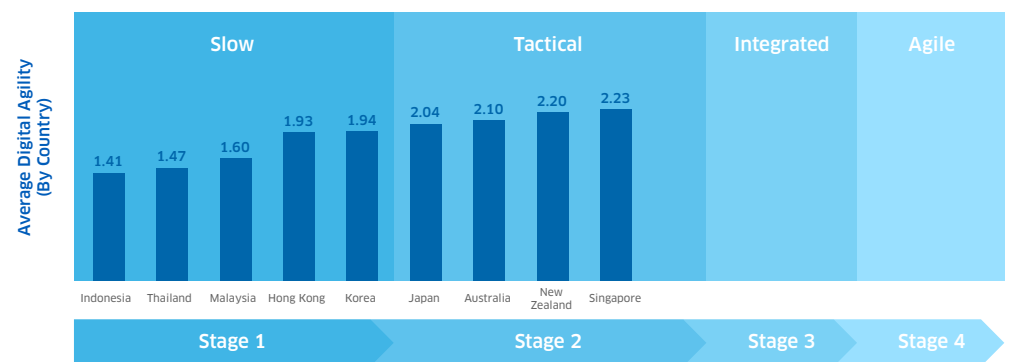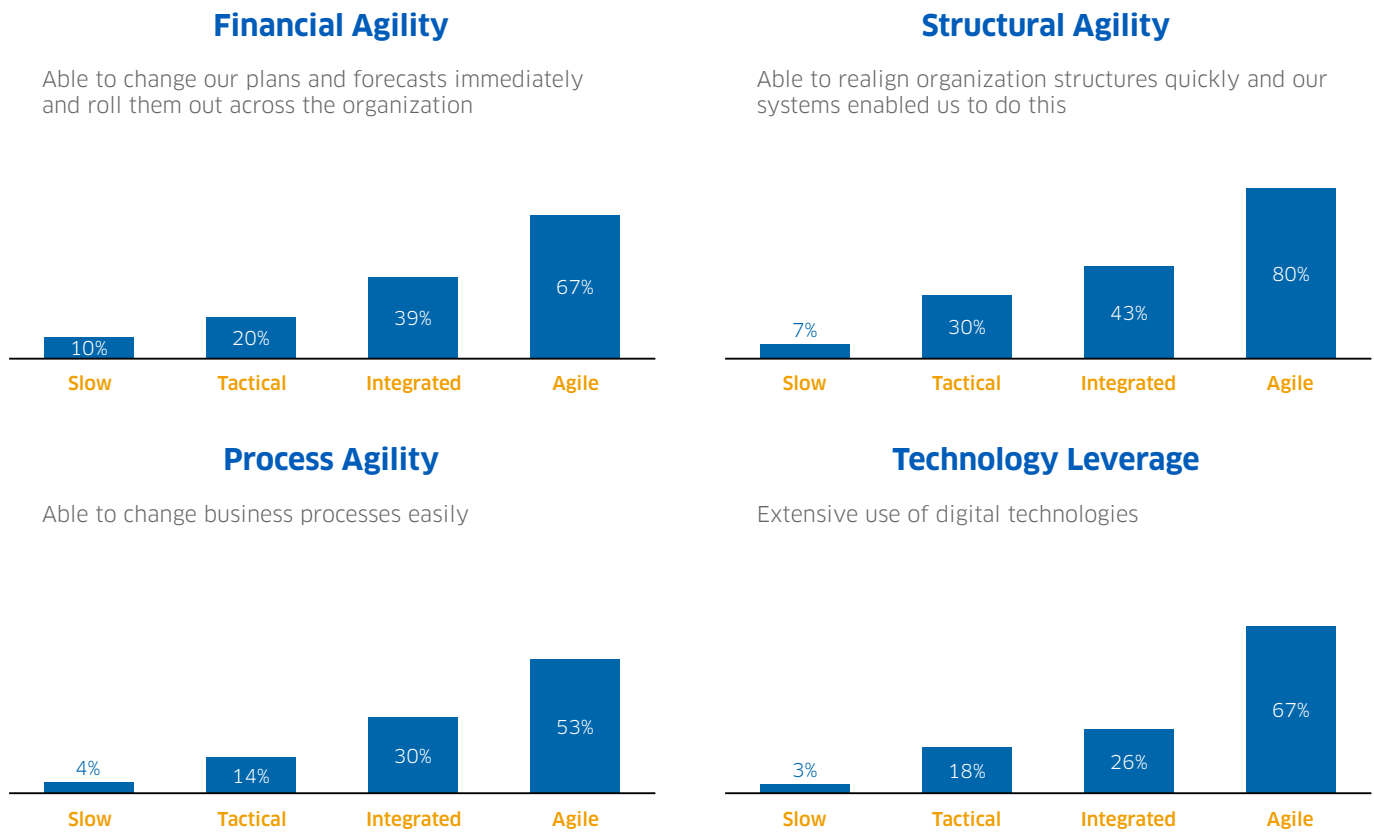Figure 3: **Asia Pacific Digital Agility by Countries**

Figure 4: **Comparison of COVID-19 responses by digital agility**

Financial Agility

Able to change our plans and forecasts immediately and roll them out across the organization

Slow	Tactical	Integrated	Agile
10%	20%	39%	67%

Structural Agility

Able to realign organization structures quickly and our systems enabled us to do this

Slow	Tactical	Integrated	Agile
7%	30%	43%	80%

Process Agility

Able to change business processes easily

Slow	Tactical	Integrated	Agile
4%	14%	30%	53%

Technology Leverage

Extensive use of digital technologies

Slow	Tactical	Integrated	Agile
3%	18%	26%	67%

when it came to organizations recognizing the need to become more digitally agile.

"The study provides a silver lining, that digital agility is the key to navigating the unchartered waters of the next normal," he said.

Cheok believes this assessment will be increasingly important in the volatile and uncertain markets of the future.

"So COVID-19 could, and in this case was, the catalyst that accelerated and changed the market conditions today. But further down the road we expect markets to be moving at a faster pace of change. Putting Darwinism in today's context, the coming years will be 'survival of the most agile.' In fact, the organizations that take heed will not only survive, but they will also thrive."

Three ways to prepare for the unexpected

By Bryce Boland, former Asia Pacific CTO of FireEye

A pandemic probably isn't how you wanted your business agility to be tested, but no matter your industry the unexpected is always a possibility. Disruption can affect your team, upend your business regulations and legal obligations, or put your customers, markets and supply chains into chaos. As globalization makes us more interdependent, disruptions can affect us in ever more unanticipated ways.

While you can't expect to commit the resources needed to prepare in advance for every eventuality, you can prepare your organization to adapt effectively. In nature, we see that evolution selects for the best able to adapt to their changing environment. In business, three things stand out in those who weather crisis well: a growth mindset, a culture where failure is accepted and internalized as learning opportunities, and where there is a relentless focus on the essential.

1. A growth mindset

Let's start with the growth mindset, as differentiated from a fixed mindset. People who are used to seeing their current situation and abilities as fixed often struggle when confronted with disruption. If their current skills and resources can't directly address the challenges, they either give up or continue on the same path. Those with a growth mindset look at changes in their situation as a trigger to grow – to learn new skills, build new relationships, or to find ways to look at the situation differently to find the opportunity.

Studies show that people and organizations with a growth mindset are more resilient in the face of challenges. A growth mindset can be cultivated through a continuous learning culture, finding areas to challenge and stretch team members, and making targets challenging (but not impossible). Many firms have followed Google's lead in adopting OKRs (Objectives and Key

Bryce Boland is an information security executive and technologist with over 20 years of international experience in security solutions and financial services industries. Former Asia Pacific CTO at FireEye – one of the world's premier global security providers.

Results), which when used well can help train a growth mindset by stretching teams and letting them see that they are capable of more today than they were yesterday.

In security, a growth mindset can be developed by continuous training, and incentivising people to look beyond their current roles and projects to learn the art of the possible. Identifying people who are locked into a fixed mindset can also help – through the hiring process or through direct assessment. To some extent, people who have been in the same roles for a long time often develop a fixed mindset, and cope less well with change. Besides education, I find placing fixed mindset team members into mixed teams where their skills contribute but they can also see others stretching and learning can help them to disrupt a

fixed mindset pattern. Projects can create the opportunities to cross-pollinate ideas and knock people out of complacency.

2. Accepting failure

The next thing that helps prepare an organization for agility in the face of unprecedented change is a cultural acceptance of failure. When an individual or team failure is seen as an opportunity to apportion blame, organizations tend to hide failures that prevent them learning. The opposite is a culture where identifying failures, near misses and even small problems is seen as positive, and an opportunity for all involved to learn, address the issue and change for the better. The power of this idea comes from enabling organizational learning (which aligns well with a growth mindset), while also providing

continuous opportunities to make improvements or adjust quickly when the old no longer works.

This is a key agility learning – nothing is ever perfect, but continuously adapting and improving is the key to success. In security, it may be a mistake to aim for 100% in everything – patching, elimination of cross-site scripting, preventing all malware entering the network. It's often better to focus on how to systematically identify failures quickly, understanding those failures, and continuously improve it.

3. Focus on the essential

The final topic is to focus on the essential. Firms that focus on making themselves lean, eliminating toil, and constantly removing non-essential activities from their work, are often able to adapt to sudden changes more easily since they know what really matters, and have a smaller set of concerns to focus on.

Having an institutional focus on the essential allows the organization to learn how to quickly identify superfluous work and distractions from the mission. Similarly, this focus can make you more agile by reducing the perceived importance of non-essential processes. Most non-essential activities can be eliminated, outsourced, automated, simplified, or reduced. Nobody ever died wishing they had spent more time doing unimportant "busy work" that doesn't move you closer to your goals.

Essentialism as an organizational and individual philosophy for work combines focus and selectivity, to allow you to work on the right things the right way at the right time. When disruption occurs, this model for thinking can be a major differentiator. For example, in security, there are always new threats and risks, but knowing which are relevant to you, when they are relevant, and precisely what is needed to address it – these are the essential factors. Having intelligence that is relevant, timely, and actionable in your specific context is essential for an agile security function.

Similarly, what is essential about running your own version of common software, servers, data centers? These all create security challenges which can divert your focus without impacting the core mission of your business; consider how much more focused you can be on your crown jewels when common services are handled by professionals who are focused on theirs.

In the end you can't predict how the world will unfold, but you can predict that well-prepared leaders and organizations with a growth mindset, who learn from their mistakes, and have a dedicated focus on identifying and executing the right things the right way, will do better before, during, and after any crisis.

How a BPO prepared itself for unforeseen business changes

Ganapathy Subramaniyan, CIO at Everise

In an ever-evolving world, organizations need to anticipate and respond swiftly to unforeseen events. For Everise CIO Ganapathy Subramaniyan, agility is pivotal in keeping up with a volatile and fast-changing business environment.

A leading Asia-based global business process outsourcing (BPO) company, Everise delivers over 500,000 customer experiences daily for *Fortune* 500 brands and fast-growing start-ups. Its global presence includes 12,000 technology-driven customer experience professionals in 14 locations around the world. Primarily, Everise is a people first company with a goal of offering employees and customers dynamic digital experiences that ultimately drive business growth.

The organization's partnership with Workday is based on similar people first strategy. Everise's initial business challenges were similar to many organizations of its size. There was no single source of data across the many business layers, no access to real-time workforce reports and disconnected legacy systems. All this combined produced inaccurate data which made reporting and analytics difficult.

Even before the COVID-19 related disruption, Everise understood the importance of agile solutions to not only solve its existing challenges but prepare them for future events.

"We stay abreast of the latest technology trends to learn what could shape our future IT strategies," says Ganapathy Subramaniyan, CIO at Everise. "We also believe that we need a flexible business model to be future ready, and that easy communication between departments is imperative. The key is remaining

alert to areas of weakness, to identify and combat them before they become issues."

Agility in action

When dealing with unexpected events like a global pandemic, companies require a robust set-up to sustain operations. When COVID-19 hit, Everise staff were well-equipped with contingency plans – having been prepped over the past few years to work from home. Within two weeks, the company was able to transition 90% of its workforce to telecommuting.

This was not the case for many other BPOs. "We work in call centers and our services are based on human interaction, to flip to working virtually may have been impossible for those that weren't set up to do so," says Subramaniyan. "I imagine those companies will now be thinking hard about digital transformation. But for Everise, we're thinking: what have we learned, and what's next?"

Envisaging the need for a virtual workforce also led Everise to develop its Work at Home (W@H) and Desktop solutions. These products have enabled customers to retain business continuity amidst COVID-19 restrictions like office closures and social distancing requirements.

Subramaniyan added, "We have strong partnerships on the ground, which helped with mobility. Innovative thinking, such as the

supply of Wi-Fi dongles and working with ISPs to increase connectivity to homes, helped us bridge the move from office to home as well."

Whilst a company may be swift in adapting to changes, technology's constantly evolving nature means that no one can be 100% prepared for surprises. For Everise, some unique challenges it faced included connectivity, security and restrictions on movements.

To address these challenges, the business had to change the way its teams communicated.

"The best strategy any of us can aim for is communication and knowledge-sharing between each other," explains Subramaniyan. "With foresight, we already addressed managing our processes with artificial intelligence and robotic process automation. These are the skills that a BPO needs to put at the forefront of their digital transformation strategy."

Sustaining a remote workforce

As for maintaining a remote workforce, Subramaniyan emphasises the need for an agile Work-From-Home strategy characterised by flexibility.

Having invested in cloud-based solutions, Everise's W@H Infrastructure is a best-of-breeds tech stack that allowed them to deploy rapidly when the pandemic hit. Its fully managed Desktop-as-a-Service (DaaS) and multi-

layered security solutions enables agents to work remotely without jeopardizing the integrity of the enterprise network. At present, the company is working towards implementing more sophisticated measures such as facial recognition.

"Internet connectivity is quite varied across regions," acknowledges Subramaniyan. "We supplied prepaid broadband kits and dongles for our existing remote workforce, and are working with telecom partners to upgrade their bandwidth. We even set a few staff up in rental rooms close to the office, where there was better connectivity."

Moving forward, he adds that IT solutions must take an agile approach to talent across borders. Strategies should be multi-speed to support diverse groups across the various business geographies. There should also be a balance between traditional and remote forms of work.

"We passionately believe that the optimal outsourcing strategy is one that is both globally distributed and blended between work-at-home and brick-and-mortar. Thus, we aim to maintain 50% of Everisers in a home-based model in future," says Subramaniyan.

A people-first philosophy

Whilst digital transformation is key to being agile, Everise remains a people-first organization.

To keep its employees engaged, constant communication and check-

As CIO for Everise, Ganapathy Subramaniyan, is responsible for the group's entire IT function. He has over 20-years of experience in facilitating and building technology management platforms and guiding IT transformation.

ins with staff are encouraged. As telecommuting may be a difficult transition for employees who have never worked remotely, support and patience is essential.

"One must also remind teams to stick to their normal work routine even from home, as work-life balance is more important than ever," says Subramaniyan. "Additional communication and collaboration tools help tremendously with employee engagement as well, improving collaboration while maintaining productivity levels."

Even from an IT perspective, employee experience is a key consideration. Before any major decisions are made, Everise deliberate as to the end user experience – both from an implementation and maintenance perspective.

"We spend a good amount of time planning every IT rollout to ensure

user intervention is minimized. For example, apart from the multiple layers of security we introduced for the W@H setup, we continue to work on new areas including fraud detection and prevention," he says.

For other CIOs looking to create an agile workforce who can adapt and perform under change, Subramaniyan's advice is to focus on talent. Talent can come from a variety of sources, and a successful workforce that drives innovation is one of diversity.

"We look for diversity in people that move internally from other departments, or externally from other associations, businesses and academic institutions," he explains. "We will also look to tap talent that can help us meet the demands of working and scaling across borders. Additionally, we'll seek out partners to aid us in maneuvering through frequently changing business scenarios."

A CIO's approach to agility in the agricultural sector

By In-Kyung Choi, CIO, Harim Group

For many organizations, agility is key in creating a competitive advantage and adapting to an increasingly digital and constantly evolving world. It's no different in the agriculture industry – one that has to actively contend with changing consumer needs.

Like other industries, agility in the agricultural sector is absolutely critical and it involves finding and solving problems quickly before they become serious. At Harim, we call this 'hole management', where the 'hole' is the problem that needs to be solved. What's important is rather than solving the problem that has already occurred, we focus on discovering potential risk elements and prevent problems in advance. For example, if you're at a factory and notice small embers, you must put it out immediately before it turns into a fire. Otherwise, the factory will burn down.

Agility requires visibility, but what's more critical is readiness. If you look at the product life cycle of our company, we design products first, then produce, and finally mass-produce. Given this process, we can reduce cost the most at the earliest phase, i.e., design stage. If you prepare well in advance, you can solve a problem with the least amount of effort and pave the way for increased agility.

Customers as the main driving force

Organizations pursue greater agility because customers constantly change. Naturally, it's important to actively identify their needs. In the past, we couldn't instantly capture consumers' opinions or feedback, but nowadays, their reactions can be understood immediately utilizing lots of data. Customers are constantly providing direct and indirect feedback through

Agility in the agricultural sector is absolutely critical

social media, and if you listen closely, you'll find something you can apply to your business to respond to customer needs with greater agility.

For example, the social listening program Harim initiated last year was a good opportunity to learn how consumers react to new products and trends. Social listening tools help us to collect a huge set of social media data, allowing us to analyze customer response and derive business insight. I think it's necessary to have this kind of system in place, and I believe it will make our business more agile.

Overcoming barriers

The path to agility is not easy – you'll encounter roadblocks along the way. One of these roadblocks is size: the larger the organization, the more difficult it is to be agile. For a large organization to gain agility, it is essential to make

the organization slim and assign the right capabilities in the right places. For instance, our farms require practical operation with efficiency, so we have only one farm manager instead of several position levels enabling everyone to just focus on the job at hand. Having a lean and streamlined organization increases agility.

Outdated technology undermines business activities and makes it difficult to proactively respond to changes in the market. Not investing in the latest technologies can be another inhibitor to agility. Rather than thinking of technology as just cost, it should be viewed as investment for the future.

Finally, not thinking ahead could also impede agility. Consider what comes next – be it a new process, an upcoming trend, or a change in consumer behavior – and work toward it in a strategic and systematic way.

As CIO for South Korea's Harim Group, In-Kyung Choi is part of the team growing the agricultural business into a total food company. With an engineering and IT background he believes a tailored distribution system underpinned by mobile is key to this growth.

Two-pronged approach

Agility can be achieved and managed more effectively by leveraging advanced digital technology. At Harim, for instance, we perform daily closing in order to address problems in advance and achieve monthly target. For repetitive routine tasks in daily closing, we apply RPA or robotic process automation to increase productivity and consequently drive agility.

However, digital technology instead of increasing business agility can also undermine it. Then, how can you ensure the technology you choose is an enabler and not an impediment? The prime determinant I believe is data. Just adopting a highly advanced digital technology doesn't immediately produce the desired outcome. For the technology to work, you need the required data. Therefore, it is really critical to have a system in place to structurally collect and analyze data.

For IT teams to improve agility, they need to go beyond technology and understand the business – how it operates, what are the challenges and which directions to take. For IT to accelerate business achievement, it needs to develop a technology roadmap that includes both the technologies you have at present and the technologies you need in the future in accordance with the business strategy.

Leadership is also vital to attain agility. Leaders must sense new technologies and trends to enable the organization to prepare for coming changes and give employees the opportunity to challenge themselves. This culture of challenge can make organizations more agile. Leaders must encourage challenge and accept failure. The key here is the ability to constantly execute in line with the changing situation.

Agility in the face of uncertainty and change

The COVID-19 outbreak and associated lockdowns has put even greater emphasis on agility. Luckily Harim is in food business which is essential for survival and the impact has been relatively smaller. Also, the company has much experience in fighting against viruses such as swine cholera and bird flu so effectively managing the business.

We used our previous experiences to effectively respond and adapt to the pandemic. We work with thousands of farms that are mostly in remote locations, so the culture of constant communication has already been well established. Naturally our employees were no strangers to remote work and could quickly adapt to the new way of working.

An unexpected event like COVID-19 can put an organization's agility to test, but so can the ever-evolving market. Today's world has become increasingly mobile with more people purchasing

"An unexpected event like COVID-19 can put an organization's agility to test, but so can the ever-evolving market."

products and availing services online. All businesses are changing their business models to cater to a mobile-centric society.

As customers change, it is natural that businesses change accordingly. Harim Group is expanding from B2BC to B2C or D2C; we directly deliver from farms straight to consumers. This business model benefits customers to choose fresher products with better quality while removing unnecessary cost in the distribution. Such a change in business model demands greater agility. We identify market trends and reflect them in product planning. We are making more

effort to understand customer needs in advance and apply the findings in production. These proactive business activities using data analysis are expected to enhance business agility.

Toward an agile future

Harim is growing into a total food company and is developing a new distribution model tailored to the mobile era. We will drive platform business to increase our point of contact with consumers. We are preparing a cutting-edge city distribution center to realize this plan. We believe mobile platform and advanced distribution infrastructure will enable new growth.

In the mobile era, how IT teams solve problems is also changing. In the past, we built our own server according to business requirements. Now, we use cloud service as much as possible and leverage SaaS solutions to increase agility. It is one of our key IT strategies to support our rapidly changing business.

Organizations in the mobile era must consider digital technology to prepare for the future. Digital technology provides solutions that enhance business agility. Harim's IT teams provide proactive support to increase the group's business agility and contribute to its growth.

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