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Leading an agile workforce: Professional Intimacy as a key interpersonal resource for leaders to support effectiveness and well-being in agile work

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## Extended Abstract

Agile working uses digital tools and innovative practices to liberate people from traditional ways of working in relation to working time, working place and working roles (Russell and Grant 2020)<sup>1</sup>. Moving towards a culture of agile working is a central goal for many organisations and, as a result of the pandemic, a mass testing of the agile working premise was recently operationalised for workers. To manage an agile workforce, leaders are facing a range of new challenges to address the individual requirements of their diverse and dispersed workforce. Yet, there is a notable lack of empirical research available that tells leaders what the resource needs of their agile workers are. If leaders do not know what agile workforces require to be effective, then they will be unable to respond to and nurture their workers. In this research study, we therefore ask the timely question “What is required to effectively lead an agile workforce?”

To address this question, we undertook qualitative research with a large public sector organisation as its workforce transitioned to agile working. We used the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll et al. 2018) to frame understanding of ‘resources’, conceptualising these as any tangible or psychological asset that is valuable in helping workers to achieve their goals (Halbesleben et al. 2014; Hobfoll 2002). In this research project, we had four key aims, to: (i) investigate what the resource and leadership needs of agile workers are; (ii) identify what behaviours and characteristics typify effective agile leaders; (iii) to understand how to best support agile leaders to be effective; and, (iv) to provide organisational guidance on effective agile leadership.

The research was undertaken between October 2021 and August 2022. Data were collected through multiple sources, including N=32 semi-structured multi-level interviews, organisational documents and the research team’s contextual knowledge. Data were analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) ‘codebook’ approach (Braun and Clarke 2021). Our primary finding was the identification of “Professional Intimacy” (PI) as a key ‘interpersonal’ resource for developing, supporting and managing an effective agile workforce. PI involves connectedness and voluntary self-disclosure in professional work relationships that establishes reciprocal trust, empathy and support. Participants reported that when leaders had PI with their teams, workers felt heard, acknowledged, appreciated and cared for, and a sense of camaraderie, dedication, empathy and compassion were enjoyed. When PI was reported to be absent, workers reported issues with lower well-being, mental health difficulties, a sense of isolation, and intentions to quit. Participants’ experiences of PI were represented by four broad themes: (1) Defining and expressing PI; (2) How leaders foster PI in agile working; (3) Barriers and paradoxes in developing and sustaining PI in agile working and (4) the “dark side” of PI. Each theme (and respective sub-themes) is described in detail in our paper and reported with illustrative quotes from participants.

We make three key contributions with this research. First, in identifying PI, we also extend COR theory by showing that some resources can only be present at an interpersonal level, i.e. PI is a resource that must co-exist and be reciprocated by at least 2 people simultaneously. This potentially advances our theoretical understanding of the concept of a resource within COR theory, which primarily defines resources as assets to be acquired or conserved at an individual level. Second, we identify a new resource – Professional Intimacy – that has not been defined or extrapolated within the agile working literature before, and explain how and why PI is key to leaders developing and supporting an effective agile workforce. Our third contribution is practical. We identified the resource needs of agile workers and their leaders, going beyond the extant research that predominantly focuses on remote or hybrid workers. As such, we identify the central role that leaders can play in supporting an agile workforce, and we provide clear evidence-based guidance to organisations and leaders in relation to this.

Overall, this research provides rich insights into an organisation’s experiences of agile working. To be truly agile and effective, we suggest that organisations will need to invest in the development of interpersonal resources such as PI, to support a continual, innovative and bold approach to agile workforce and leadership development.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Agile working’ extends ‘place’ based foci of remote, hybrid and distributed working concepts, involving changes in working time, place *and* role in response to societal and market forces.