Transforming HR As Agile Business Partner: The Case Of Vistaprint

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In any organization, HR can be playing fundamentally different roles. In my previous articles I distinguished three possible roles. One is a kind of *"administrator"* acting principally as agent implementing processes on behalf of the top management. A second is that of a *"moderator,"* who seeks to be responsive to the needs of all stakeholders—managers, staff, shareholders; in this role, when HR refers to customers, it is usually referring to internal customers.

And third is where HR is acting as *"Agile business partner"* in a role that is focused on delivering value for *external* customers. In this article, I explore: what does the Agile business partner role look like in practice? And how does it differ from the other two roles?

Four of the most striking features of the particular case discussed in this article (Vistaprint) are (a) the change in name from HR to Talent & Experience (T+E); (b) the way in which T+E is fully embedded in the business itself; (c) the way in which Vistaprint has embraced Agile thinking and reconceived the T+E function in terms of generating and continuously improving *products*, rather than executing time-limited *processes* or *projects*; for instance, the "employee experience" at Vistaprint is conceived as a T+E product; and (d) the way in which the T+E team seeks to align the employee's experience with Vistaprint's customer experience.

In firms pursuing Agile management in the SD Learning Consortium (SDLC), 'HR as business partner' is increasingly seen as a necessary facet of the Agile transformation journey. The firms in the SDLC are of different sizes and operate in different sectors. They are all at different places on the journey, and they are proceeding at different speeds. But in terms of people management, they are generally heading in the same direction.

The Case Of Vistaprint

One of the SDLC firms that is most advanced in terms of reconceiving the people management function is Vistaprint, a wholly-owned and rapidly growing subsidiary of Cimpress (CMPR), which employs over 7,000 employees globally in its offices and printing facilities. Through the use of its own patented technology, Vistaprint aggregates large numbers of customized orders from each of its brands and print them in automated

production facilities in North America and Europe. Over the last five years, the stock price of Cimpress has risen from around $45 in 2013 to over $150 today. The company's U.S. offices are in Waltham, Massachusetts, while its European offices are in Barcelona, Spain. Its three printing facilities are in Deer Park, Victoria, Australia; Windsor, Ontario, Canada; Venlo, Netherlands and Reno, Nevada.

Vistaprint has three major groups.

- Professional services (technology, transformation, marketing, product, analytics, finance)
- Manufacturing, which is responsible for making the physical product
- CARE, which is mainly customer service.

I talked recently with Chris Connors, head of Technology and Transformation at Vistaprint, and Colleen Fuller, head of Talent and Experience (T+E). The T+E group is on an Agile transformation journey, in which the T+E team acts an active business partner. (Within the member firms of the SDLC, an Agile transformation journey is seen as including a *mindset* in which (a) the primary purpose of the firm is delivering value for external *customers*; (b) work is descaled and carried out to the extent possible in *small, self-organizing autonomous teams*, operating in short cycles and getting direct feedback from external customers; (c) the firm operating as a *fluid network*, rather than a top-down hierarchy; and (d) instilling an *Agile culture* throughout the firm.)

Vistaprint's Agile Transformation Journey

Steve Denning: So Vistaprint is on an Agile transformation journey?

Chris Connors: Indeed! When I talk about our Agile transformation journey I am talking specifically about the professional services group within Vistaprint. The CARE group has been going through an analogous transformation for the last couple of years and didn't use the term, "agile", even once. The Manufacturing group went through a Lean transformation about five years ago, and that has really taken hold. At Vistaprint, we care less about labels than about the substance of what we are doing.

We started on our Agile transformation journey 4 years ago. We staffed a coaching team to assist in the journey. Then coming into 2017, we went from three to ten coaches. We also took our entire Talent and Experience Team and brought them into the same organization as our Agile coaches. They are now part of my organization which is called Technology and Transformation. Within our group, Colleen Fuller heads the Talent and Experience team.

Denning: How is it going?

Connors: We are doing some things well and some things we are still working on. One advantage that we have at Vistaprint is the strong support that we have from what you might call "the top." That is one area where we take advantage of being a medium-sized firm, as compared to giants like Microsoft with over 100,000 staff. I am a member of the team that you might call the C-suite. I report to the CEO of Vistaprint. Our leadership team has been on its own Agile transformation. We have lots of gaps and we are still far from where we want to be, in terms of implementing Agile principles. But we are being very intentional about it and we are agreed on the direction we are heading. It's important to note that while today we have top-down support, this isn't how our transformation started. It was much more grass roots.

Denning: I understand that unlike some other firms, Vistaprint has fully decentralized people management. You have embedded what you call Talent and Experience (T+E) within the business unit?

Connors: Yes, in this respect, it's a bit different from some of the other firms. We have fully integrated Talent and Experience both as a business partner of Vistaprint and in our Agile transformation journey. We've been operating this way for over a year now and we've made significantly more progress on our people investments than years past. This tells me we're headed in the right direction. We also have lots of companies asking us 'how we did it' and 'what it looks like' which is another encouraging signal.

HR Becomes 'Talent and Experience'

Denning*: HR isn't called HR anymore at Vistaprint?

Colleen Fuller: We don't think of our people as "resources" to be mined. We changed our name in 2016. Our team is known as the Talent and Experience team. This better reflects the work that we are doing. We are very much focused on nurturing talent and enhancing the experience that we are trying to create in the people who work here. That includes how they are growing and developing, and how we are bringing people into the organization once they are recruited and what kind of experience they have here, and beyond.

Now that we are part of the Transformation group, the change in name makes even more sense. We are now fully integrated in terms of our approach to talent. We partner very closely with the Agile coaches, as we help figure out how we can help instill the Agile mindset throughout the organization.

Denning: You mentioned that Vistaprint has been going through a lot of change from a perspective of organizational alignment and culture. Can you share more about it?

Fuller: Vistaprint is implementing a significant transformation. Over the past year, the organization has defined our purpose (or what we call, our "why") as well as a set of cultural behaviors and ways of acting that represent us at our very best. We also recognized that we needed to enable teams to move faster, to innovate and to bring our customers' needs closer in. Ultimately, we want to create an environment that will not only help us reach our strategic goals, but also make Vistaprint the kind of place where everyone is inspired, passionate, and feels they can make a difference.

There is also a significant external driver as well, related to how people want to work. The old methods of command-and-control and organizational hierarchy are now replaced by networks of individuals organized around common goals and outcomes. People don't all want the same development opportunities, rewards and physical space. The one-size-fits-all approach is becoming increasingly undesirable, so we need to evolve how we work as a global organization and how we create experiences for our employees.

Denning: How are these internal and external factors impacting your talent teams and how they need to evolve?

Fuller: Our team, which used to be called HR and is now called the Talent and Experience (T+E) team, was formed in parallel with the Agile business transformations. These factors have pushed us to take a step back and define both what we do and how we evolve. In the past, work such as career development was handled functionally, often through the old HR Business Partnerships model. In this new world, we've empowered our T+E team leads to function similarly to a traditional Product Owner in Scrum software development. They are tasked with defining outcomes in support of an improved employee experience.

Denning: What have been some of the biggest changes?

Fuller: Having changed our operational model, one of the biggest shifts is how we have gone from being very reactive and functionally oriented, asking questions like, "What does the function need?" to being proactive, where we might now ask, "What experience does the employee need to deliver this particular product?"

In addition, our transformation calls for us to focus on all aspects of how we show up, work and behave in our everyday interactions. We have pulled in the Agile Coaches into our Transformation Team to focus on achieving high performance and better ways of working to deliver value to our customers early and often. We believe that by aligning coaches, who were members of the former Agile coaching team, directly with the Talent & Experience team, creates a tighter integration with the overall business transformation.

Vistaprint's Talent And Experience team

Denning: What is your team's vision?

Fuller: We have spent a lot of time thinking about our vision and trying to get the words just right! Ultimately, our vision is to both create and enable a customized and exceptional employee experience that inspires and supports our teams to deliver their best work for each other and our customers. We aspire to create an environment that is so unique and impactful that when our team members look back at their career here it is crystal clear: "Vistaprint is a moment in my life that fundamentally stands out because of the significant impact it had on me, both personally and professionally, and it was impossible to get it anywhere else. It just exceeds any other experience."

'Employee Experience' As A Product

Denning: Your focus on the employee experience as a kind of continuing product, rather than a project or process is very interesting. What is your approach to delivering on that?

Fuller: We are trying something fundamentally different from the way that we have operated with regard to delivery of our work. We are approaching the employee experience as a product portfolio. Within that portfolio, we have different areas or "products" that we choose to focus on and invest in. Examples of this include performance and feedback, reward and recognize, grow and develop, leadership, and acquire and onboard.

We are leveraging a similar approach that the organization uses with customer experience to help us define our employee experience approach. We leverage insights internally and externally to guide us and we use segmentation and personas to help us identify different groupings of employee drivers and needs.

Denning: Can you say more about how this looks in practice?

Fuller: We believe that building and organizing cross-functional and agile teams around a set of prioritized features for our desired employee experience – each with its own product owner – will enable the design and delivery of these experiences faster.

What this means is that we will build feature teams for the 'employee experience' product. The Talent & Experience Product Owners define the roles or skills needed and then we will look to resource the team accordingly. The team members could come from the Talent and Experience team, as well as other centers of excellence. In addition to this, we rely heavily on people across the organization for input and feedback. We think it's critically important that we design our experiences with our target audience (our employees) at the table with us. The Product Owners work in an agile way across the entire team, approaching work in increments, leveraging white-boards to visualize our work, incorporating feedback loops, and co-creating with our customers. We have agile coaches embedded on all our product teams to ensure we are working in ways that are consistent with our agile values.

We also rely on two key groups of people from around the organization, the Agile Champions network and a Feedback Champions network. There is a distribution list that anyone in the company can use to initiate a pull signal for help with a particular topic. It can be anything from facilitating retrospectives, asking for assistance with an impediment or even offering training for teams on giving and receiving feedback. These Champions Networks have become a great extension of the T+E team.

Denning: That's interesting. So how does the 'regular work' of the T+E business partner happen?

Fuller: Well, that is evolving, too! In the past, our Business Partners were embedded in the functions and were a critical part of the functional leadership, focusing on things like team health and new team formations, performance feedback loops, organizational design, communications, and talent agendas. We saw a lot of overlap between our Talent Business Partners (Talent Management) and our Agile Coaches, now called Transformation Coaches. So, we decided to bring these teams together and in doing so, they now have a shared backlog, based on pull signals, and we are moving away from dedicated Talent Business Partners by function. This has enabled us to do a lot more and has also created incredible learning opportunities for both our coaches and our business partners by aligning on work and sharing new ways of operating.

Denning: What other teams make up your Talent & Experience Function? How is this turning the employee experience into a continuously-improving product, rather than a series of finite projects?

Fuller: We have a team focused on employee insights which pushes evidence-based data, insights and conclusions to continuously improve our product of the 'employee experience.' They are responsible for analyzing data, generating insights, and testing of our ideas and potential new products. They also partner with the feature teams and Talent Management to launch new initiatives and to increase the effectiveness of ongoing initiatives.

We also have a Talent Acquisition team which is responsible for delivering on our product known as the 'acquire' experience. This includes finding new ways to source candidates, as well as integrating aspects of our overall employee experience into ways that evaluate talent against our cultural values.

For example, this year we began experimenting with interview games that allow us to more easily assess alignment with culture and role by bringing in key elements of our employee experience right into the interview. An example of this is the "Sailboat" game, where candidates experience real-time feedback delivered and discussed with the hiring manager during the interview itself. The experience of real-time feedback, delivered directly from the person who gives the feedback, is a regular part of what it feels like to work here. So, incorporating that into our interview process helps us to see whether candidates are open to and value that kind of experience.

Denning: You have mentioned that your Talent & Experience Transformation team works in an agile way. How does that work?

Fuller: The T+E Team approaches its work in an agile fashion. We do our work in increments, leveraging white-boards to visualize our work, incorporating feedback loops, and co-creating with our customers. We prototype our products, deliver Minimum Viable Products, iterate and test with our customers (i.e. our employees) often. We have a dedicated agile coach to build this discipline within our teams.

Practically speaking, we can see this change physically, with work-visualization boards, stickies everywhere, and daily standups. But it's also present in less tangible ways such as more transparent communication, work that gets feedback way before it's done, and teams sharing their failures because in reality they're just learnings. It's these less tangible results of agile that have really become part of our everyday culture so much so that we don't always think of it as "agile" but simply how we work.

Another important thing to note is that the Agile Transformation Coaching team sits as part of our overall team. So, they help and remind us: we have to practice what we preach!