Growing your own agility coaches to adopt new ways of working

Agile coaches play a vital role in enterprise-wide agile transformations. To develop enough coaches, companies should create specialized training academies.

by Amit Anand, Sahil Merchant, Arun Sunderraj, and Belkis Vasquez-McCall

Companies are increasingly looking to infuse agility into their operating models. However, as organizations attempt to scale these efforts across their entire business, new challenges that simply didn't exist at the micro level are beginning to surface. These challenges are especially prevalent where traditional organization silos need to interact.

The big realization for many companies is that scaling agile is not simply a matter of replicating agile practices across more teams. This is why trying to adapt project-management offices (PMOs) to support agile projects or bringing in more scrum masters is unlikely to be effective (see sidebar, "The scrum master's role in scaling agile"). Rather, agility as an operating model requires the rewiring of core enterprise-wide processes. With this comes a need for the organization to operate differently.

The degree of change required to adopt agile ways of working across an entire organization is simply too large to repurpose existing roles and structures. Only by investing in agility coaches—and a comprehensive program to identify, train, and support them—can companies expect to scale and sustain agile across the enterprise.

Enterprise agile: Changing the fundamental DNA of an organization

Agile at scale calls into question deeply entrenched wisdom around core processes such as budgeting, capital allocation, or people evaluation. Even a fairly uncontroversial organization norm—that annual people evaluations are done by "your boss"—doesn't have to hold true when implementing enterprise-wide agile.

We have a clear approach to helping organizations make the transition to enterprise agility (Exhibit 1). Even before developing agility coaches (more on that later), companies need to align the top team's aspirations, cocreate the agile organization blueprint, and test this via pilots that help the organization learn and adjust. In conjunction, companies need to create the road map to roll out agile across the organization, redesign core systems and processes to ensure stability, and build
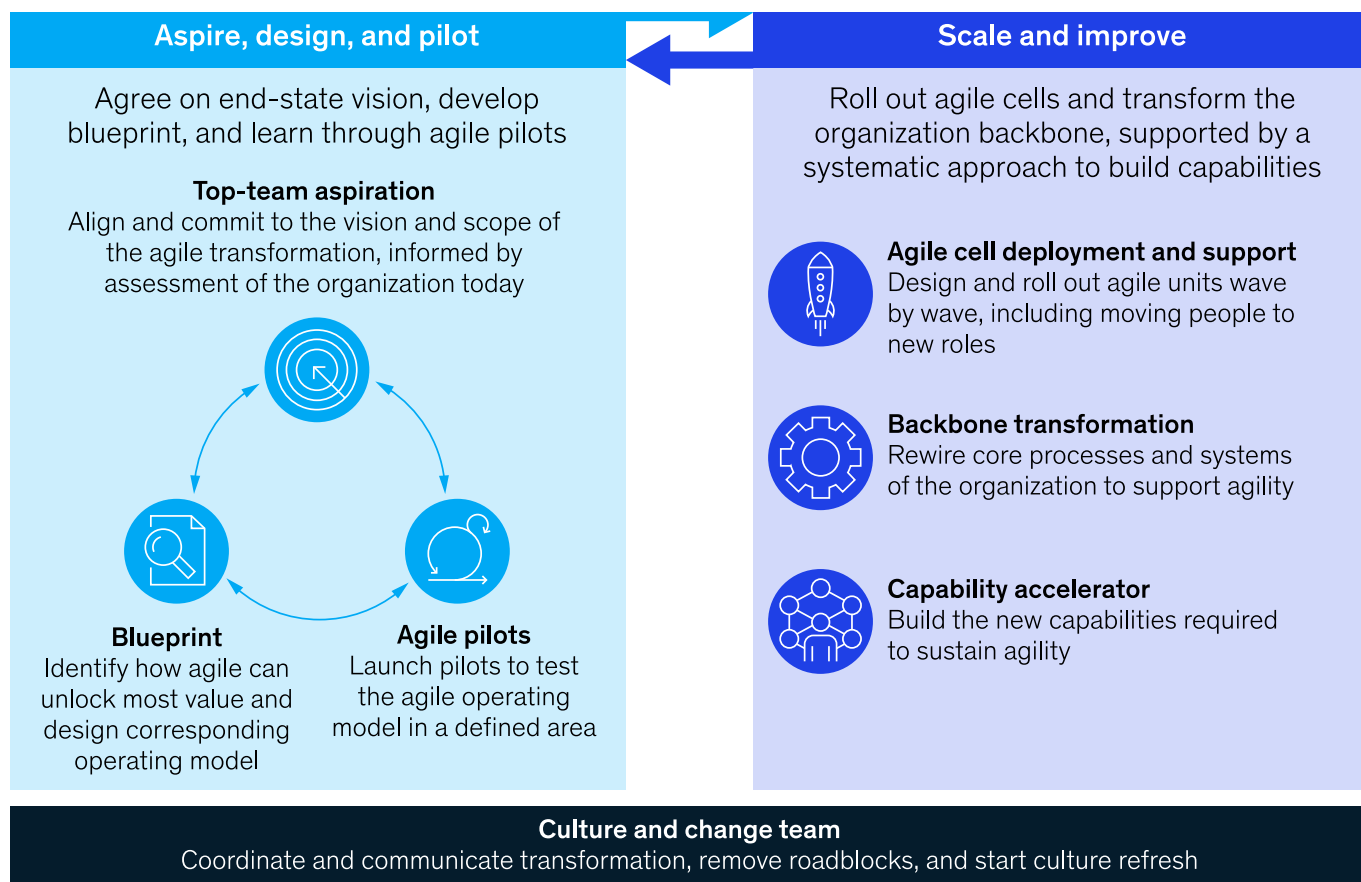
The scrum master's role in scaling agile

We believe that the role of the scrum master is limited when it comes to scaling agile, for the following reasons:

1. Where a large organization has hundreds or thousands of small agile teams, it will be impractical to have a scrum master embedded into every single team.

2. Teams often hand off accountability for blockers to a scrum master. The absence of a scrum master encourages self-organization and ownership within the team; instead of passing impediments to the scrum master, team members now learn to own and remove obstacles themselves. This drives a culture of team accountability over escalation.

3. Scrum masters have traditionally had a software or delivery focus, whereas the challenge in enterprise agile relates equally to company-wide processes (for example, capital allocation) and the mind-sets that accompany these processes.

This is not to say that scrum masters can't play an important role for concentrated agile efforts where individual team performance is the key focus. However, where an individual team fits into a much more complex agile ecosystem, a coach with a broader set of organization experience is preferred.

Exhibit 1

An agile approach requires continuous learning and course correction.

Aspire, design, and pilot	Scale and improve
Agree on end-state vision, develop blueprint, and learn through agile pilots	**Roll out agile cells and transform the organization backbone, supported by a systematic approach to build capabilities**

Top-team aspiration
Align and commit to the vision and scope of the agile transformation, informed by assessment of the organization today

Blueprint
Identify how agile can unlock most value and design corresponding operating model

Agile pilots
Launch pilots to test the agile operating model in a defined area

Agile cell deployment and support
Design and roll out agile units wave by wave, including moving people to new roles

Backbone transformation
Rewire core processes and systems of the organization to support agility

Capability accelerator
Build the new capabilities required to sustain agility

Culture and change team
Coordinate and communicate transformation, remove roadblocks, and start culture refresh

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the new capabilities required to sustain agility.[1] In our experience, building up the right internal capabilities is one of the challenges companies most underestimate.

Introducing the agility coach

At its essence, the agility coach (or agile coach, as the role is sometimes called) is a change agent who helps leaders and teams adopt new ways of working via agile practices and mind-sets. The agility coach is a core element in transforming an organization toward a more modern way of working and a completely new operating model. After completing the first phase of a particularly ambitious enterprise-wide agile transformation, the CHRO at a national telecommunications company said, "If you have really good agility coaches, you might have a chance."

The agility coach does the following:

— Creates a culture of high performance, psychological safety, and belonging across the enterprise

— Coaches people across all layers of the enterprise by changing their mind-sets (such as systems thinking) and behaviors (such as servant leadership) to help unlock their potential

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[1]For more information, see Wouter Aghina, Aaron De Smet, and Kirsten Weerda, "Agility: It rhymes with stability," *McKinsey Quarterly*, December 2015, McKinsey.com; and Daniel Brosseau, Sherina Ebrahim, Christopher Handscomb, and Shail Thaker, "The journey to an agile organization," May 2019, McKinsey.com.

— Applies a range of tools and practices from agile and lean to addresses enterprise-wide bottlenecks

— Continuously evolves the ways of working across the enterprise to ensure realization of business and customer value

— Supports scaled agile ceremonies (for example, big room planning[2]) that enable cross-team prioritization, dependency management, and alignment with company strategy

The rule-of-thumb ratio is one agility coach to every three to five teams, especially for cross-functional teams. That said, the final ratio will depend on the maturity of the teams and the maturity of the agility coach, as well as the type of team in question (for example, call-center teams with homogeneous profiles and a loose application of agile principles may need less intensive coaching).

The role played by agility coaches highlights a significant departure from how companies have previously tried to scale agile. Until recently, organizations have almost exclusively focused on agile practices and *what* agile should look like when embedded across many teams. Very little emphasis has gone into *how* to make that happen. Even less attention has been paid to supporting agile mind-sets and new company-wide processes.

Simply scaling agile practices across more teams often meant that executives and leaders were untouched by agile. The rising need for the agility coach is an acknowledgment that, to truly scale agile, leaders also need to adapt their mind-sets and behaviors to lead across new ways of working.

What makes a good agility coach?

We have identified four fundamental capabilities and intrinsic qualities that good agility coaches possess:

1. *Self-mastery.* Agility coaches have the soft skills, mind-sets, and behaviors required to understand the environment, listen actively, empathize with individuals, and interact with others effectively. More than that, this role is about empowering others. It is a selfless role where the team gets the glory while the coach is in the background influencing and enabling but, ultimately, not playing on the field.

2. *Coaching.* Agility coaches get the best out of others in a way that supports learning, encourages ownership, and promotes desired outcomes. A good agility coach creates opportunities for teams to learn from their mistakes, explore solutions, and find the answers on their own. This is much more difficult than it sounds because it requires going against the corporate DNA of finding a problem and immediately solving it. Agility coaches need to be able to identify nonproductive behaviors and mind-sets that impede agility, to challenge individuals in a way that leads to growth, and to do so without being the annoying class know-it-all. The agility coach creates an environment for individuals to run safe experiments, validate assumptions, and make good decisions.

3. *Agile mastery.* Agility coaches understand the practices and mind-sets underpinning agile ways of working at the enterprise level, translate those to technical and nontechnical environments, and facilitate both team and larger-group effectiveness. Given that new ways of working can often involve a changing relationship with technology, agility coaches increasingly find it beneficial to have some fluency across a combination of software development, analytics, and design and the ability to navigate IT departments if they are going to be successful. They also need to master the nuances around agile working—for example, whether that be determining when to use kanban versus scrum versus a looser application of lean, how to facilitate a resource-allocation meeting with product owners and people leaders,[3] or the role big room planning plays in a corporate quarterly resource prioritization.

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[2]Big room planning is a quarterly activity where a group of small teams that are working on the same common purpose (sometimes referred to as a "tribe") come together to set their objectives for the next quarter and plan how they will achieve them.
[3]Sometimes referred to as chapter leads in an increasingly popular organization model for enterprise agile.

4. *Commercial acumen.* Agility coaches can drive team performance against the defined mission within the financial and operational realities of the organization. They recognize that new ways of working need to deliver an outcome that translates into commercial impact. That might be via productivity, speed to market, customer satisfaction, or better quality outcomes, but ultimately, they drive performance in the context of a clear business need. Coaches need to understand the business they are in and how value is created within their industry to be effective.

Within each skill category, we have outlined the skill expectations on a more granular level (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2

Effective agility coaches possess four fundamental qualities.

Self-mastery	**Growth mind-set** Uses feedback to continuously improve Reflects upon and learns from setbacks	**Insight** Listens actively Understands strengths and weaknesses and seeks out opportunities to improve	**Effectiveness** Handles multiple squads efficiently Uses various communication techniques effectively
Coaching	**Conflict** Identifies team dysfunction and strategies to deal with it Is comfortable in uncomfortable situations	**Facilitation** Asks probing questions Is able to deliver engaging presentations and workshops	**Development** Accurately measures squad maturity and identifies actionable improvement Personalizes coaching to meet the needs of individuals and teams
Agile mastery	**Inclusion** Is fluent in the relevant customer-experience framework and uses it effectively Lives the company's diversity and inclusion values	**Technology** Leverages engineering practices (eg, refactoring, pair programming) and automation tools to increase speed Understands end-to-end production cycle and how to navigate release challenges	**Process** Understands the various agile roles and is able to coach beyond squads Understands and effectively empowers squad- and tribe-level events
Commercial acumen	**Value** Understands the core value drivers Understands the industry and relevant trends	**Entrepreneurship** Shows a bias to action and getting things done Brings creativity, innovation, and thought leadership to push teams	**Resources** Actively contributes to the quarterly business-review process Is able to make decisive commercial recommendations based on trade-offs

Where to find agility coaches

Given the nature of the role and the sudden need for companies to have more of them, businesses are having difficulty finding genuine agility coaches. While the role has exploded on LinkedIn and many profiles claim to be agility coaches, there is no degree or accepted global accreditation that provides comfort around the skills and experience needed for the job. It is one of those roles that needs to be learned through hands-on practice, and yet, there are few organizations that have adopted agile at scale in order to provide the learning environment for agility coaches to master their craft. At one large bank, 60 percent of applicants were ruled out immediately because they did not have the right mind-set for the role.

Neither has working with external vendors that can provide an army of agility coaches been as fruitful as many organizations had hoped. At one national telecommunications company, less than 10 percent of its agility-coaching needs were able to be satisfied by external-market candidates.

Even if a pool of agility coaches were externally available, we would still encourage organizations to focus on growing their own. Agility coaching can be taught to those with the right intrinsic qualities. Moreover, outsourcing these key roles will often lead to an influx of agility coaches who are disconnected from a company's culture and want to dogmatically apply agile the way they know it rather than the way it needs to be molded to a particular organization. Companies should identify people internally with the right mind-set and attitude and strong influencing skills to become a great coach, and then support them with a center of excellence— what we have called an agility coaching academy.

The agility coaching academy

The primary role of an agility coaching academy is to build up a sufficient number of qualified agility coaches. To do that, the academy oversees their career journey from recruitment to mastery (Exhibit 3). Specifically, the academy does the following:

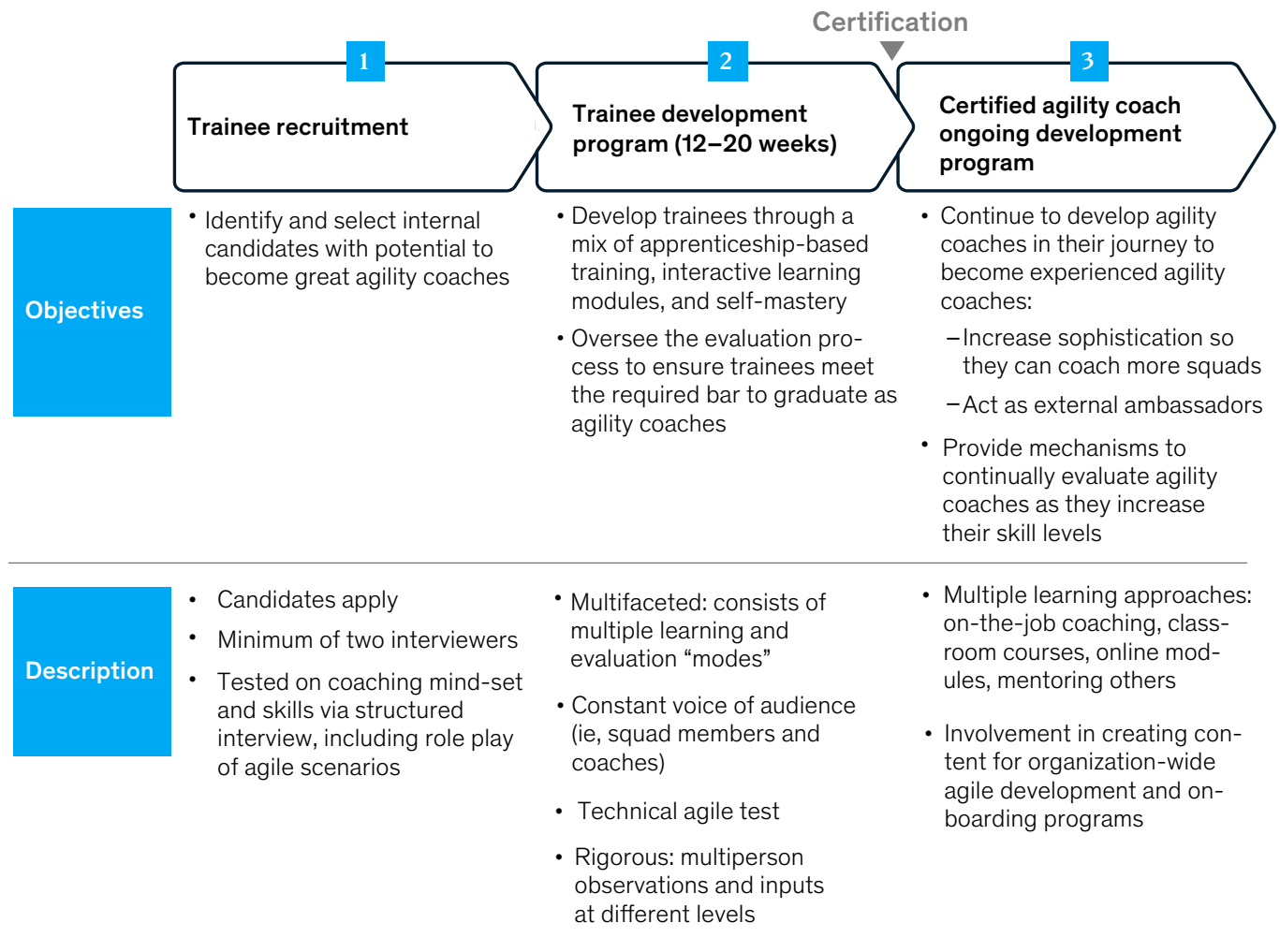— Is accountable for identification and recruitment of agility coaches

— Administers the training and development program comprising formal learning modules, on-the-job shadowing and apprenticeship, project work, an online exam, and regular multidirectional feedback

— Maintains high performance expectations and oversees the graduation of trainees (the bar is kept high, which means that a number of trainees inevitably don't make it through the academy)

— Ensures ongoing learning and development for agility coaches who have graduated

— Assigns agility coaches to teams

— Oversees the performance evaluation of agility coaches

The national telecommunications company mentioned earlier set up its agility coaching academy in a matter of weeks. After identifying a set of people with the right intrinsic skills, the academy put trainees through a rigorous full-time, 12-to-20-week training and development program with a foundation of apprenticeship centered around on-the-job learning (Exhibit 4). To be clear, these trainee agility coaches were productive and contributed during these 12–20 weeks. The trainees shadowed a few select experienced mentor agility coaches who ideally had been involved in setting up the academy and refining the agile-practices playbook for this particular company.

With the oversight of these mentor agility coaches, trainees increasingly took on more hands-on coaching, worked through formal learning programs, completed self-reflection tasks tailored to their development needs, and shared real successes and failures with the rest of their cohort. They were regularly evaluated by both their mentor agility coach and the teams they were coaching.

Graduation from this training program wasn't automatic—25 percent didn't make it through. Those who did graduate earned the right to start working with their own teams as beginner coaches. They understood that there is a career of learning

Exhibit 3

A typical agility coaching academy offers a development program comprising three parts: recruitment, training, and ongoing development.

Certification

	1 Trainee recruitment	**2** Trainee development program (12–20 weeks)	**3** Certified agility coach ongoing development program
Objectives	• Identify and select internal candidates with potential to become great agility coaches	• Develop trainees through a mix of apprenticeship-based training, interactive learning modules, and self-mastery • Oversee the evaluation process to ensure trainees meet the required bar to graduate as agility coaches	• Continue to develop agility coaches in their journey to become experienced agility coaches: – Increase sophistication so they can coach more squads – Act as external ambassadors • Provide mechanisms to continually evaluate agility coaches as they increase their skill levels
Description	• Candidates apply • Minimum of two interviewers • Tested on coaching mind-set and skills via structured interview, including role play of agile scenarios	• Multifaceted: consists of multiple learning and evaluation "modes" • Constant voice of audience (ie, squad members and coaches) • Technical agile test • Rigorous: multiperson observations and inputs at different levels	• Multiple learning approaches: on-the-job coaching, classroom courses, online modules, mentoring others • Involvement in creating content for organization-wide agile development and onboarding programs

ahead of them to truly master being an agility coach and that graduation simply meant that their training wheels were being removed.

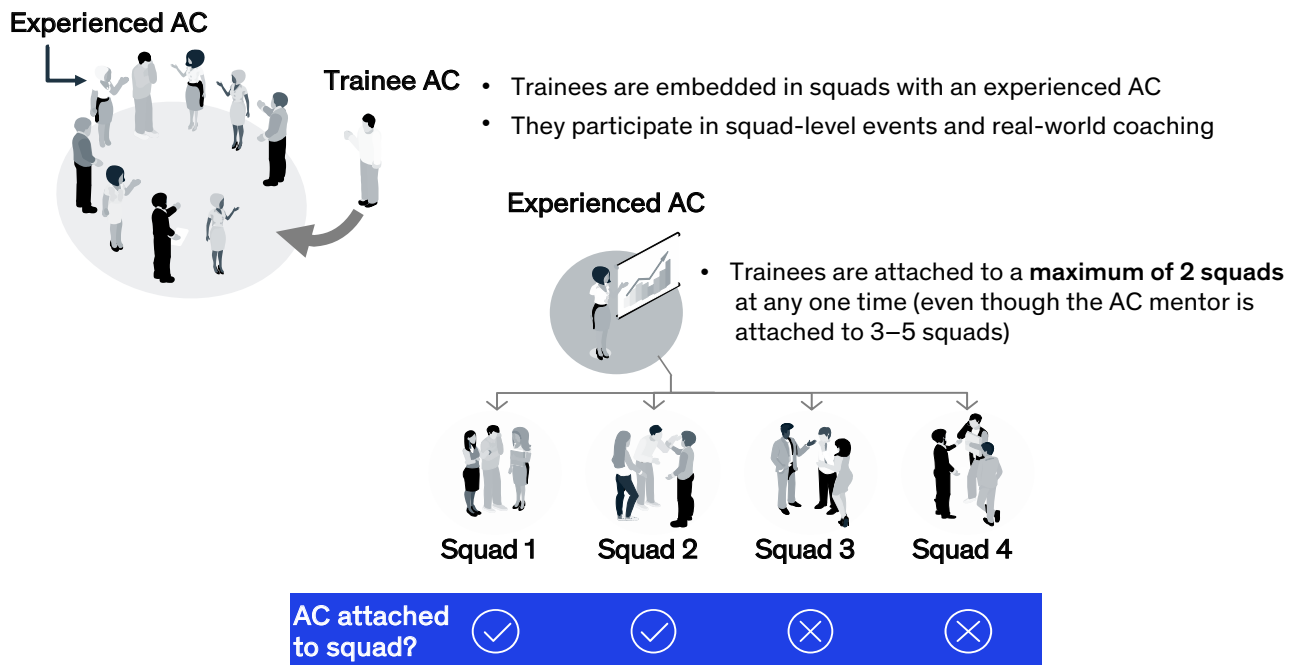### Key ingredients for success

To ensure the success of the agility coaching academy, it is critical to have the right support and leadership structure. Typically, the academy is led by a full-time executive who reports to either the CHRO or some other member of the C-suite depending on who is really driving the agile transformation—it could be the CIO, the head of transformation, or the COO. The academy lead is accountable for the following:

— Setting the strategy and defining the delivery road map for the academy

— Running the day-to-day operations of the academy, such as building and refining the academy backlog

Exhibit 4

In a typical trainee-development program, trainees shadow experienced agility coaches and progressively gain responsibility for supporting teams.
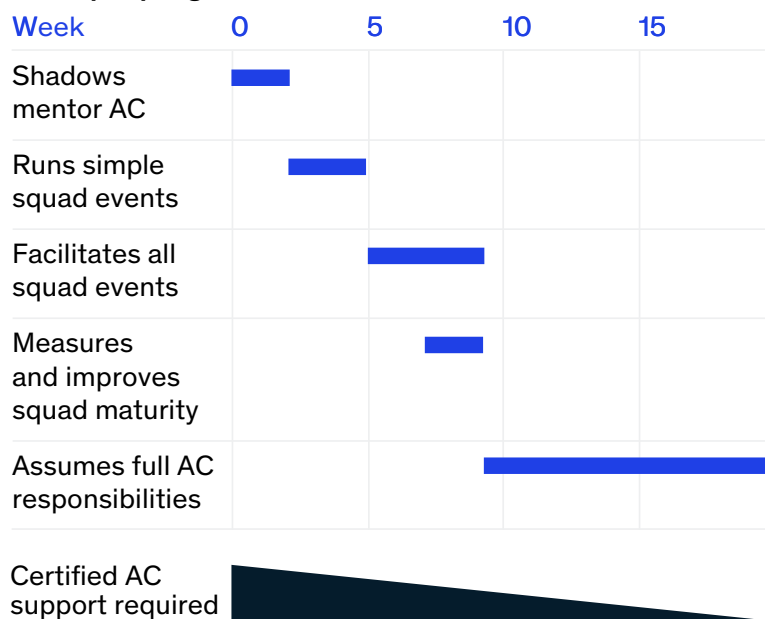
Trainees shadow experienced agility coaches (ACs), who act as mentors

Experienced AC

Trainee AC
- Trainees are embedded in squads with an experienced AC
- They participate in squad-level events and real-world coaching

Experienced AC
- Trainees are attached to a **maximum of 2 squads** at any one time (even though the AC mentor is attached to 3–5 squads)

	Squad 1	Squad 2	Squad 3	Squad 4
AC attached to squad?	✓	✓	✕	✕

Trainee responsibilities increase over time

As trainees become more experienced, they are able to run their own squad-level agile events

Example progression of trainee activities[1]

Week	0	5	10	15
Shadows mentor AC	▭			
Runs simple squad events		▭		
Facilitates all squad events			▭	
Measures and improves squad maturity			▭	
Assumes full AC responsibilities				▭▭
Certified AC support required				

[1]Progression of trainee activities is dependent on individual performance.

— Leading the recruitment of coaches

— Overseeing learning and development of the trainee agility coaches, and administering the learning and development of graduated coaches

— Defining the evaluation criteria and mechanisms to measure effectiveness of the agility coaches

— Deploying the right agility coaches to the right areas and teams

— Overseeing performance evaluations for the agility coach cohort

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If an agile organization is like a living organism, agility coaches are like the white blood cells that protect the integrity of agile ways of working. They help sustain the health of the agile enterprise. Different skills, different motivations, and different learning paths are all required to help the coaches be successful. To succeed in their transformation efforts, companies need to first understand what agility coaches do and why they are important, and then take a structured approach to finding and developing them.

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