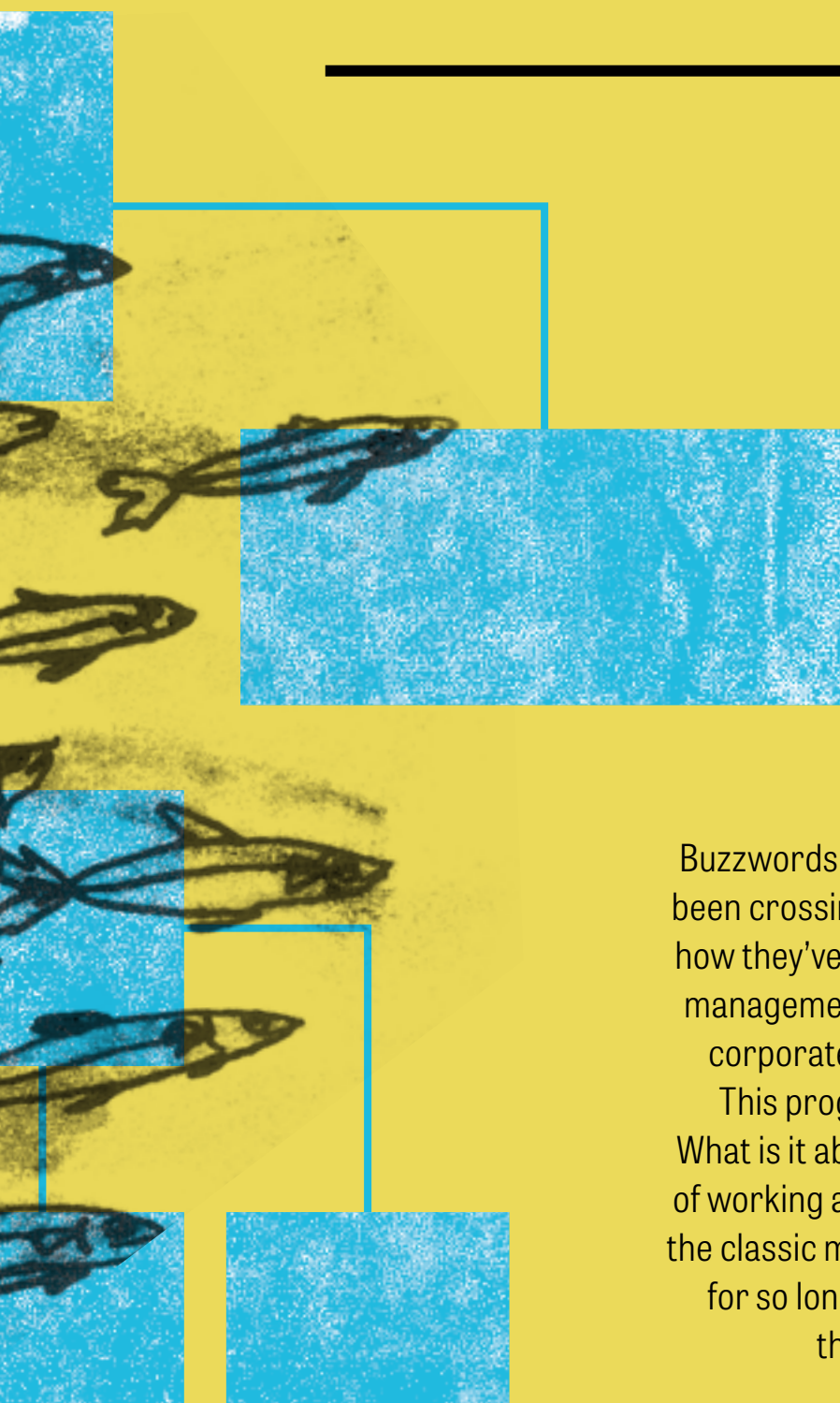**Dr. Markus Steilemann**
CEO
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Why Being Agile is the Future of Working

Buzzwords such as "agile" or "project swarms" have been crossing my path more frequently and I noticed how they've not only become increasingly relevant in management vocabulary but also globally impacted corporate culture over the past couple of years. This progression in relevance got me thinking: What is it about this phenomenon? Can this new way of working actually be a successful counter-model to the classic management theories we have relied upon for so long? Or is it just another overrated trend that will fade away after a while?

Success today requires the agility and drive to constantly rethink, reinvigorate, react and reinvent." Bill Gates, principal founder of Microsoft and one of the greatest visionaries of our time, knew long ago what companies all over the world and throughout industry are increasingly realizing just now: Digitalization will keep us on our toes and – as a consequence – will accelerate competition massively. To tackle those challenges of the future, there seems to be only one way – revolutionize! Turn business models upside down and transform them into agile organizations. But while everyone is talking about it, the meaning of agile working seems hard to fully grasp. I want to take a closer look at the idea behind this concept.

From silos to swarms

Agile companies pursue a dynamic way of thinking and acting. They are able to adapt quickly to changing conditions and customer needs – in my opinion, that's an extremely important feature considering we are living in a constantly evolving environment and the future becomes increasingly harder to predict. While traditionally managed companies rely on top-down hierarchies, straight structures and responsibilities, agile-thinking organizations believe in quite the opposite. Their credo: Wave goodbye to bureaucracy! To achieve more efficient project management and better project results, they implement cross-sectoral project swarms whose members are self-organized and encouraged to throw silo mentality out the window. Instead, it's time to start thinking outside the box. The new agile set-up transforms the traditional definition of leadership – controlling and delegating tasks – to an organizational form that empowers employees and enables them to be confident in their knowledge and decisions. This in turn triggers a feeling of responsibility and a more motivated work ethic leading to promising project results.

WAVE GOODBYE TO BUREAUCRACY!

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Agile at the core

But beware: Transforming corporate structures alone and implementing project swarms will not suffice. In order to be successful, I believe companies have to take on agility as a holistic approach. Being agile is not only a question of structure and organization but also a question of attitude – mentality matters. A mindset that has to be part of the company's DNA, implemented at the core. Let me explain what I mean.

❭ **Firstly,** being agile at the core starts with management. As decision makers we have to be willing to embrace the concept and, as I've mentioned, shift to a less controlling, more empowering style. Inevitably, this means giving up control and trusting employees with it. To make this work, project swarms should be staffed with employees who embody different character features, different capabilities and different perspectives. Understandably, giving up control can be hard and challenging, but in the end this will ensure that projects are viewed and pursued from various angles to find the best possible solutions.

❭ **Secondly,** while it is important for project swarms to vary in competencies as well as personalities, it is also crucial to not restrict them to the organization alone. In fact, agile teams should work beyond company borders and establish and include a network of digital suppliers, start-ups, distributors and customers. This will enable them to benefit from a full force of expertise with all parties being interlocked and able to quickly adapt in the digital age.

❭ **And thirdly,** one of the challenges to becoming agile lies in employees themselves. The reason for this is simple – and intrinsic: The human being is a creature of habit. Employees are used to structures and ordered responsibilities. For the transformation process to be successful, they have to be willing to break out of familiar patterns. Becoming an employee with agile traits means they will be self-organized, decisive, motivated, inspired and courageous.

Uniting the unusual

At Covestro, we also had to review our company's culture when we became an independent corporation a few years ago. To put it bluntly: We turned into a start-up with over 150 years of company history. But how do you unite start-up mentality with centuries of experience? Not an easy task for such an unusual combination. From the beginning, we made it our mission to keep pushing boundaries and to be pioneers in making the world a brighter and better place to live. And to achieve that goal, we as a company of course need to be innovative, sustainable and efficient. But even more so, we need to empower and enable our employees to live by our core values – to be curious, courageous and colorful.

That is why in our research we rely on the intelligence of the collective. For many years, Covestro has been working with a broad network of partners across Germany, where the company is based, and the rest of Europe to successfully advance research projects. We believe in a great importance of swarm intelligence since the variety of networks and different partnerships increase the probability of achieving a successful result. I am convinced that different research projects and partners can benefit each other and findings from one project can also drive other projects forward. At Covestro, we do not underestimate this value. In the end, we have to keep in mind that there is one common, overarching goal: research success and with that making the world a better place.

Another example that helps embed our values and shape our company's culture is the Covestro Start-Up Challenge. We introduced this competition for employees around the globe to submit promising business and project ideas. Members of the winning team are released from their regular jobs for twelve months in order to work on their idea and are funded with one million Euro to pursue the project. At Covestro, we see great potential for creativity throughout the company and we consider innovation to be an important aim for every employee. The Start-Up Challenge helps us to promote a pioneering spirit and entrepreneurship within the company. Through initiatives like this, an empowering corporate culture and the ambition to push boundaries we hope to become an even more agile company.

To conclude, I personally agree with what Bill Gates said long before agility became a trend. It goes beyond structures and, when done right, becomes a culture. Companies that tackle the transformation process from the core, are courageous and think differently, can benefit from the development towards agile organizations and eventually grow. Then, being agile will turn out as a smart solution instead of being just a short-term trend. ▪