



# REBELS WITH A PLAN: WHY THE BEST COMPANIES ARE DISRUPTIVE

What do the 2025 World's Most Admired Companies have in common? They're unafraid to cause a little disruption. Here's how they do it.



# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>03</b>
<b>Why Disruption Matters</b>	<b>05</b>
<b>Innovation: The Key to Moving Progressively</b>	<b>07</b>
<b>Agility: The Key to Moving Quickly</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Change Readiness: The Key to Organizational Agility</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Leaders, Get Moving</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Gain More Insight</b>	<b>23</b>



# MOVE FORWARD OR FALL BEHIND

**An airline.**

**A manufacturer.**

**A software company.**

**A retail chain.**

At first glance, these businesses couldn't be more different.

But when we heard from more than 400 executives from companies participating in this year's World's Most Admired Companies (WMAC) rankings, we uncovered an interesting pattern.

No matter their industry, size, or geographic reach, the WMACs share one important trait.

They don't stand still.



This year's WMACs stand out because they're highly responsive to changing conditions. This helps them maintain leading positions in terms of reputation and performance. They're not afraid to reinvent to respond to emerging challenges."

**Mark Royal, Korn Ferry**

## IT'S TIME FOR STRATEGIC DISRUPTION

The World's Most Admired Companies have cracked the code on how to shift gears quickly, efficiently, and with maximum impact.

We're calling them "strategic disruptors" for their ability to implement policies and processes that infuse their organizations with a culture that prioritizes:

- 1. Innovation: to move progressively**
- 2. Agility: to move quickly**
- 3. Change readiness: to move effectively**

In doing so, the WMACs have created engines of transformation that allow them to get and stay ahead of the pack.

Read on to find out how they do it.

# DISRUPT



## WHY DISRUPTION MATTERS

---

### THE DISRUPTORS

WMAC executives are nearly twice as likely to describe their company's strategic positioning as disruptive (i.e., focused on leading transformation) than they are to call it prudent (i.e., focused on proven opportunities).

---

## A MOVE-FORWARD MINDSET

Before we get into how the WMACs have created a culture of innovation and change readiness, let's look at the fundamental spirit that underpins their efforts.

WMACs embrace a move-forward mindset. From the corner office to the front lines, their people consider disruption to be a key lever for success.

It's not about breaking things for the sake of it. It's about recognizing that, today, standing still means falling behind and missing out on significant opportunities.

As a result, compared to their peers, WMACs are less likely to play it safe. They don't stick rigidly to tried-and-true approaches when facing new challenges or opportunities. Their leaders are confident in their organization's ability to adapt and innovate to give them the edge. How do WMACs get so comfortable with disruption?

“There's a feeling among leading WMACs of being more outward-looking. They are more connected to their customers and consumers and what's going on in the world,” says Korn Ferry's Laura Manson-Smith.

“They know where they're placing their bets, which makes them more confident in their ability to disrupt.”



Leading companies recognize that the many external changes they face don't just create challenges—they create opportunities, too.”

**Laura Manson-Smith, Korn Ferry**



# INNOVATION



**INNOVATION: THE  
KEY TO MOVING  
PROGRESSIVELY**

## WHY INNOVATION MATTERS

“Innovation” has become a corporate buzzword, but for this year’s WMACs, it really is a differentiator.

These organizations have driven new business, gained market share, improved productivity, and unlocked efficiencies—all by seeking new and novel ways to solve problems.

“

We’ve seen among the World’s Most Admired Companies a pronounced willingness to innovate, even in areas of current strength. It’s part of their formula for success.”

**Mark Royal, Korn Ferry**

This year's WMACs reinforce the best business innovation practices of previous cohorts. In bringing new and better ideas to life, they are:

## 1. BOLD

They invest more in strategic research and development. They prioritize long-term innovation over short-term gains, ensuring they stay ahead of industry shifts.

## 2. TECH-SAVVY

They leverage emerging technologies, including generative AI, and empower teams to work with them.

## 3. RISK-TOLERANT

They accept that every cutting-edge initiative carries some possibility of failure but aren't afraid to take calculated risks.

## 4. COMPREHENSIVE

They make everyone in the organization responsible for generating innovative ideas, and they incentivize this behavior with rewards.

## 5. ANALYTIC

They regularly measure the efficacy of their innovation strategy and programs to quantify impact and use this insight to pivot when needed.

## 6. COLLABORATIVE

They create diverse, cross-functional teams and give them tools to share best practices with one another.

---

In short, WMACs don't just take shots in the dark.

They articulate a clear vision for innovation and focus their efforts on it," Royal says. "It reflects the fact that innovation holds the prospect of a big payoff but also introduces clear costs."

## MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

This year's WMACs use bold innovation practices to drive growth. Bringing innovation as the top organizational capability required to ensure future success. Their peers rate it third.

## BEST PRACTICE: INVEST WITH CARE

Most leaders understand that corporate innovation requires time, resources, and money. But calibrating these investments can be tricky.

- **Which initiatives are worth it?**
- **How much should each get?**
- **When should each start?**

The WMACs are thoughtful about where they place their investments in innovation. They don't blindly chase trends.

"They direct their innovation initiatives to carefully chosen areas within the organization," says Royal. "That increases the likelihood that they'll see a strong return on the investments that they are making."

When they see that a new or novel idea creates a clear opportunity for the organization to move ahead, they'll invest in a big way—WMACs significantly outspend their peers on research and development.

It's not just about investment, though. A key differential is that WMACs are patient. They are far more likely than their peers to consistently resource worthwhile ventures that may take longer to pay off. "They don't pull the plug too quickly," says Royal.

But they also know when to cut their losses when an innovation project isn't working out.



Top-performing WMACs are not afraid to shift resources away from activities that aren't showing promise. They don't suffer from the escalating commitment phenomenon that would have them riding a bad horse for too long."

**Mark Royal, Korn Ferry**



# HOW TO MAKE EVERYONE AN INNOVATOR

WMACs don't drop all the work of changemaking on an individual leader or selected task force.

"They focus innovation across the organization," Royal says. "They see it as a core organizational capability, and therefore, it becomes everyone's responsibility."

Not everyone is naturally inclined towards, or comfortable with, innovation, even if they have terrific ideas. That's why best-in-class companies develop cultures in which all team members, regardless of role, are empowered to engage in creative problem-solving.

Here are three things you can do to follow their lead.

## 1. Broaden the Definition

WMACs see a culture of innovation as an equally valuable driver of external and internal improvements.

"They recognize that it's not only about what you deliver to the market," says Royal. "It's also something to be directed inward, in terms of finding new and better ways of doing things."

## 2. Capture and Spread Ideas

The WMACs create formal processes—like internal *Shark Tank*-style pitch competitions—to ensure promising employee-led innovations don't die on the vine.

"They create environments where good ideas can bubble up, be captured, and shared," explains Manson-Smith.

## 3. Destigmatize Risk

Not everyone is comfortable pushing boundaries, so WMACs make it clear that just because an idea didn't make it to fruition, it won't have a negative impact on the innovator.

"Top WMACs are not only tolerant of risk, but they also recognize that not all promising ideas are going to pan out as intended," says Royal.



Innovation comes in different forms. It can be, 'Wow! What an amazing new service!' It can manifest as continuous improvements internally. And it can take the form of slight changes to better adjust to client needs."

**Laura Manson-Smith, Korn Ferry**



# AGILITY



**AGILITY:  
THE KEY  
TO MOVING  
QUICKLY**

## WHY AGILITY MATTERS

You might have the most innovative solution in the world, but if you can't implement it or get it to market at the right time, you can miss your window of opportunity.

"Change really is happening faster than a few years ago," says Manson-Smith. "Organizations have to be able to react."

This is why business agility is such an important competency of disruptive organizations.

Corporate agility is, at its core, the ability to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities quickly and effectively. It's a capability often associated with nimble startups, but even vast enterprises with thousands of employees across multiple locations and business lines can adopt it.

This year's WMACs have made agility part of their corporate DNA by embracing a few key capabilities. These organizations are:

- **Streamlined**

They simplify processes as much as possible to minimize bureaucratic delays.

- **Resourceful**

They apply new technologies not only to create internal efficiencies, but also to drive new revenue-generating opportunities.

- **Sharp**

They hire people with the capability to learn new things quickly and well.

"Agile organizations are able to flexibly navigate change and disruption," says Royal. "They've learned to adapt their focus areas, the way they work, what they prioritize—sometimes very quickly."

## QUICK THINKING

The top three tactics WMACs consider critical to improving their organizational agility:

**1.**

Automation and use of technology  
**(cited by 44% of WMACs)**

**2.**

Simplifying or eliminating processes  
**(cited by 39%)**

**3.**

Aligning managers and employees around a common purpose  
**(cited by 31%)**

## BEST PRACTICE: LEVERAGE TECH FOR EFFICIENCY

Most people who've spent time working for large organizations know of bureaucratic bloat. As companies grow, responding to changing circumstances can become a slow and cumbersome ordeal—the opposite of agile.



WMACs are constantly taking a close look at how they work and asking themselves, ‘Can we simplify processes and move on from existing processes that may not be serving us well anymore?’”

**Mark Royal, Korn Ferry**

This year's WMACs are leaning hard on cutting-edge technologies like AI to boost agility by removing tasks, reshaping roles, and accelerating responsiveness.

Many are using AI to more quickly spot and seize opportunities by, for example, allowing sales teams to have faster access to customer insights and products that match those needs.

“AI puts knowledge at the fingertips of workers—fast. It enables a new kind of speed in responding to customer needs,” Manson-Smith explains.

Technology can't single-handedly turn a sprawling enterprise into a sprightly one, but it sure can help make things move a little faster.

---

### TECH MATTERS

51% of WMACs are aligning their operating models and organization designs to adapt to technology, including AI. Only about a third of their peers can say the same.

---

## HOW TO FAIL FAST

This year's WMACs are not only agile in capturing opportunities. They also bounce back quickly from failure.

Even the most meticulously thought-through strategy will fall flat sometimes. It happens to everyone—including some of the largest and most admired companies in the world.



WMACs tend to be culturally oriented to tolerate risk and failure. They recognize that when you are agile and curious, and you step outside of comfortable boundaries, you might not always get the result you want.”

**Mark Royal, Korn Ferry**

Here are three tenets WMACs employ to fail faster:

### 1. Make it Safe

Unless there's misconduct at play, there is no need to penalize people whose new projects don't work out.

**“Experimenting means allowing people to fail sometimes,” says Manson-Smith.**

### 2. Learn From It

Conduct a quick postmortem to better understand what went wrong.

**“WMACs are likely to view well-chosen risks that don't pan out as learning opportunities,” Royal explains.**

### 3. Move On

Don't dwell on past missteps.

**In the words of Samuel Beckett, “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”**

# CHANGE

A woman with short, light-colored hair, wearing a dark blazer over a white collared shirt, stands with her arms crossed on a balcony. She is looking off to the right, towards a blurred city skyline under a bright sky. The entire image has a green color overlay.

**CHANGE READINESS:  
THE KEY TO  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
AGILITY**

## WHY CHANGE READINESS MATTERS

If innovation represents what your organization does to move forward, and agility represents when you do it, change readiness is how you make it happen.

It comprises a range of variables, including organizational approaches, attitudes, processes, and communication channels. And, of course, people—especially leaders.

“It’s everything that helps you navigate change effectively,” explains Royal. “And it’s a very important organizational capability.”

---

This year’s WMACs embody change readiness in three key ways.

### 1. Strategic Focus

They don’t try to do everything at once, instead devoting energy only to what matters most.

### 2. Alignment

They communicate the scope and purpose of change and cultivate buy-in for new directions.

### 3. Adaptability

They’re able to roll with the unexpected hiccups that accompany any transformative exercise.

## TRANSFORMATIVE CONFIDENCE

**64%** of WMAC leaders consider their organizations change-ready, with a clear transformation plan and a team able to lead or adapt to change.

## BEST PRACTICE: REDEFINE ROLES

No one can expect the job they have today to remain unchanged forever. Savvy organizations like the WMACs are responding by creating more flexible org charts and seeking out talent with more adaptable skills.

Many best-in-class companies are replacing rigid job descriptions with job architectures that allow for quick and cost-effective adaptation when human capital needs change.

“Organizations are not necessarily hiring for fixed roles. They are looking at the work that needs to be done and the skills people need to do it,” says Manson-Smith. “Because of that, they can move people around more quickly as needs evolve.”

WMACs are also actively adjusting the skills and competencies they hire for, prioritizing skills like agility, curiosity, and the ability to learn and apply new things as much as, if not more than, experiences and education.

“They’re asking, ‘Can we count on you to be adaptable and agile in the way you operate?’” Royal explains. “It’s a much more forward-looking way of hiring.” And they’re extending that outlook to the professional development of existing employees as well.

---

## WANTED: ADAPTABLE LEADERS

Learning agility and curiosity of a candidate is the No. 1 priority for WMACs when hiring for leadership roles.

---



WMAC executives consider learning and development a cultural priority. They place a clear emphasis on the continual growth and development of people.”

**Laura Manson-Smith, Korn Ferry**



## HOW TO BUILD A CHANGE-READY TEAM

No organization becomes change-ready overnight. It takes some effort to prepare management and employee teams to manage transformation.

On this, WMACs are ahead of the pack. Their tactics vary but tend to complement the six transformational mindsets Korn Ferry has identified as helpful in developing change-ready organizations. We call it ADAPTS.

---

## CHANGE AGENTS

The ability to lead or support change, along with learning agility and curiosity, are cited by WMAC executives as the most important criteria for success for people in their companies.

---

# A

### Anticipate the Unexpected

Dispel workplace complacency and proactively look for early hints of changes to come.

# D

### Diversity of Perspectives

Challenge established assumptions and seek alternative interpretations, driving innovation through diverse thinking.

# A

### Anchor on Purpose

Assess new situations from the purpose lens, turning disruptions into opportunities.

# P

### Progress over Perfection

Adopt an action-oriented approach, learning through doing and acting quickly to seize new opportunities rather than focusing solely on perfection.

# T

### Trust to Partner

Rely on collective intelligence, bringing together knowledge, experience, and intuition from across the organization to respond to unexpected situations.

# S

### Sustain the Organization

Demonstrate the ability to maintain operations while adapting to new challenges and changes.



**LEADERS,  
GET  
MOVING**

# GUT-CHECK: ARE YOU READY?

Disruptive organizations need disruptive leadership.

As you prepare to steer your organization towards a more innovative, agile, and change-ready future, experts recommend asking yourself three key questions.

## Q1.

### Am I stuck in the success trap?

“WMAAC leaders are not captive to past success,” Royal explains. “They show a willingness to adapt and adjust despite past track records that might encourage them to just stay the course. They don’t assume what worked in the past will work in the future.”

## Q2.

### Am I connecting the dots?

“The best leaders look across all dimensions of what drives organizational performance, and they consider it all together,” says Manson-Smith. “They have a very clear growth strategy, and they really focus on aligning the whole organization to support it.”

## Q3.

### Am I a team player?

“Collaboration runs through a lot of what is involved in disruption,” says Royal. “Leaders have to think with an enterprise mindset about opportunities and challenges. That means asking, ‘Am I really as connected and collaborative as I can be to help the organization thrive?’”



“

I feel positive about the impact our company is having and my role in it.”

“

I am leading the change; there is no way back.”

“

I feel energized about developing others in the company.”

## CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

When asked to reflect on how the changing workplace has impacted them personally, top responses among WMAC executives were:

## GAIN MORE INSIGHT

It takes effort to build organizations that can disrupt progressively, quickly, and effectively. And change is never easy.

But the formidable performance of this year's WMACs can't be discounted.

To rise above the competition, it's clear that organizations need to focus on innovation, agility, and change readiness.

In 2025, disruption is simply smart.



## WE CAN HELP

Eager to start developing a more innovative, agile, and change-ready organization today? Our experts can help.

**GET IN TOUCH**

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities.

We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.

**Business advisors.**

**Career makers.**