

The Agility Imperative

Why the five-year strategic plan is obsolete -
and what high-performing organisations do instead

- **2020 - The Pandemic**
Strategic plans rendered obsolete overnight
- **2022–2025 - The AI Revolution**
39% of skills becoming outdated by 2030
- **2025–2026 - The Geopolitical Shock**
Supply chains fractured. Markets repriced.

Hassan Khan

Founder, HK Strategy Advisory

30+ years in executive leadership across multinationals, SMEs and charities

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From complexity to clear action.

OVERVIEW

We live not in a time of change, but in a time of constant change. In the space of five years, three seismic disruptions have each independently challenged long-term strategic assumptions for organisations across every sector. The global pandemic of 2020 restructured how, where, and for whom work gets done. The AI revolution, accelerating from 2022, is making entire categories of skills obsolete faster than most organisations can respond. And the geopolitical shocks of 2025 and 2026 have demonstrated that supply chains, energy markets, and commercial relationships can be fractured in forty-eight hours with no advance warning.

This paper draws on more than 30 years of operational leadership experience across multinational corporations, SMEs, founder-led businesses, and the charity sector — experience that predates and independently supports the research findings cited throughout. The cited research is presented as corroboration of observed practice, not as its foundation.

Against this backdrop, the five-year strategic plan is not merely outdated — it is a liability. It was designed for a stable world and rests on assumptions of market predictability, foreseeable competition, and knowable capability requirements that no longer hold. Organisations that continue to plan as if stability is the default operating environment are not being disciplined. They are being reckless.

This paper argues for a different model — one that separates what should be stable from what must be agile. The North Star of an organisation: its mission, purpose, and values — these should not change with every market shift. But the strategy that pursues that mission? The capability plan that builds toward it? The objectives that operationalise it? These must be built to flex, adapt, and respond at the pace of the environment, not the pace of an annual planning cycle.

KEY FINDINGS

- Three disruptions since 2020 each independently invalidated long-range strategic assumptions — suggesting a pattern of accelerating disruption frequency, even if that pattern cannot yet be treated as a historical law.
- The WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025 (1,000+ employers, 14M workers) finds that employers expect 39% of skills to become outdated by 2030, and anticipate AI will transform 86% of businesses — the largest sentiment shift the survey has recorded.
- McKinsey research across 2,190 respondents confirms that agile organisations are 1.5x more likely to report financial outperformance relative to peers (McKinsey, 'How to Create an Agile Organisation', 2017 survey data).
- Long-horizon capability development — up to 3 years, reviewed annually — remains legitimate. Long-horizon objective-setting does not. The distinction between these is the heart of this paper's argument.
- The DALE Framework — Direction, Alignment, Leadership, Execution — synthesises proven organisational principles into a practical, cohesive model designed specifically for SMEs, charities, and founder-led organisations.

This paper is structured around five arguments: the evidence of disruption, the case against rigid long-term planning, the distinction between what should endure and what must adapt, the Three-Layer Strategic Model, and the practical instrument — the DALE Strategy Canvas — through which organisations can implement this model today.

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THREE DISRUPTIONS IN FIVE YEARS: THE END OF STRATEGIC STABILITY



The case for strategic agility does not rest on theory. It rests on five years of lived experience — three separate, independent disruptions that each arrived without reliable warning and each severely tested the assumptions underpinning long-range strategic plans. A critical reader might rightly note that history has always contained seismic shocks — the 2008 financial crisis, the attacks of September 2001 — and that three examples do not prove a law. This paper does not claim otherwise. What it argues is that the frequency, the technology-driven nature, and the speed of these disruptions represent a meaningful shift in the operating environment — one that prudent organisations should plan for as a baseline assumption, rather than an exceptional scenario.

DISRUPTION ONE — THE PANDEMIC, 2020

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic. Within weeks, organisations everywhere confronted the same reality: the strategic plans they had constructed, the capability programmes they had funded, the operating models they had built — none of them had been designed for this. Remote work moved from a peripheral consideration to the primary operating model in days. Supply chains that had been optimised for efficiency rather than resilience fractured under demand shocks they had never modelled. Entire business models — travel, hospitality, physical retail, in-person services — were invalidated overnight.

McKinsey's analysis of 25 organisations across seven sectors during the pandemic found that agile business units — by their own assessments — responded better than non-agile units across customer satisfaction, employee engagement, and operational performance. The research acknowledges these are self-assessments, but the pattern was consistent: the distinguishing characteristic of organisations that adapted most effectively was the depth to which agile practices had been embedded in their operating model before the disruption arrived. (McKinsey, 'An Operating Model for the Next Normal: Lessons from Agile Organisations in the Crisis', March 2020 — analysis of 25 companies across 7 sectors)

DISRUPTION TWO — THE AI REVOLUTION, 2022-PRESENT

When OpenAI launched ChatGPT in November 2022, it triggered the fastest capability disruption in modern business history. Within eighteen months, generative AI had begun materially changing the economics of content creation, data analysis, coding, customer service, legal research, financial modelling, and dozens of adjacent functions. The organisations most exposed were those that had locked capability development plans in place for three to five years — investing in skills that AI was simultaneously making obsolete.

39%

of current skill sets will be transformed or outdated by 2030

WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025

86%

of businesses expect AI and information processing to transform them by 2030

WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025

8x

increase in generative AI investment since ChatGPT launched in November 2022

WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025

The WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025 — drawing on surveys of over 1,000 global employers representing more than 14 million workers across 55 economies — finds that employers expect two-fifths of their workforce's existing skill sets to be transformed or become outdated over the 2025–2030 period. These are survey-based projections of employer sentiment rather than hard economic data, but the scale and consistency of the expectation across sectors and geographies is itself significant. Investment in generative AI has increased eightfold since ChatGPT's launch — suggesting the expectation of disruption is already shaping organisational behaviour, not just sentiment. (WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025, January 2025)

DISRUPTION THREE — GEOPOLITICAL SHOCK, 2025–2026

In June 2025, Israeli strikes on Iranian targets and subsequent retaliatory action sent immediate shockwaves through global logistics networks. Brent crude jumped more than 10% within days. Airlines rerouted flights to avoid conflict zones. The threat of a Strait of Hormuz closure — which handles approximately 20% of the world's oil exports and 21% of liquefied natural gas trade — triggered volatility across energy markets that rippled through every sector dependent on stable energy pricing or Middle Eastern supply chains. (*Trade Finance Global, 'Lessons from the June 2025 Israel-Iran Conflict', September 2025*)

The conflict escalated further in early 2026. At its peak, vessel traffic through the Strait of Hormuz dropped from an average of 138 ships per day to near-zero. Oil reached approximately \$100 per barrel — a 38% increase within days. Aluminium producers in Qatar and Bahrain suspended deliveries to global customers. EV battery components, semiconductors, pharmaceutical ingredients, and agricultural feedstocks — all moving through the same maritime routes — faced disruption simultaneously. Supply chain advisory firm Gartner has estimated that, across disruption events, organisations typically see a 40% surge in cost-to-serve — a figure cited in ISM's analysis of this specific conflict. (*Z2Data, 'How the Iran Conflict is Rippling Across Global Supply Chains', March 2026; ISM, Supply Management News, March 2026*)

"The speed and scope of escalation in the Middle East will have taken many businesses by surprise and has highlighted just how unstable the region can become in as little as 48 hours."

Simon Geale, EVP at Proxima (ISM Supply Management News, March 2026)

The critical point is not the specific geography or the specific conflict. The critical point is the pattern. The 2020 pandemic, the 2022 AI disruption, the 2025–2026 geopolitical shocks — these are three independent events, arising from entirely different causes, each delivering the same strategic lesson: the world can change in ways that invalidate your assumptions faster than a traditional planning cycle can detect, respond to, or absorb.

THE PATTERN — CONTINUOUS DISRUPTION

Whether or not these three disruptions constitute proof of a permanent new era of instability, they make a compelling case for a precautionary principle: organisations should plan for volatility as the baseline, not the exception. A systematic review of 249 empirical studies on organisational agility, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Management Review Quarterly* in 2024, found a sharp increase in research interest since 2017 — reflecting, the authors note, a timely response to recent environmental and societal changes. Academic interest in agility is not ahead of lived experience. It is catching up with it. (*Springer Nature, Management Review Quarterly, 'The Organisational Impact of Agility: A Systematic Literature Review', June 2024 — analysis of 249 studies, 1998–2024*)

The implication for strategy is profound. An organisation cannot plan its way to stability. It can only build its capacity to move. The question is no longer whether disruption will come — it is whether your organisation is structured to absorb it, adapt to it, and continue to pursue its mission through it.

WHY THE FIVE-YEAR PLAN FAILS

The five-year strategic plan is not a failed idea. It was a rational response to a particular operating environment — one where markets were relatively stable, competitive dynamics changed slowly, and the planning assumptions organisations made in year one were likely to remain broadly valid in year five. That environment no longer exists. The plan was not wrong. It was designed for a different world.

The fundamental problem is the assumptions that long-horizon planning can rest on. It tends to assume that the market you are competing in will be recognisably similar in five years. It assumes that the capabilities you are building today will remain relevant. It assumes that the regulatory environment will evolve incrementally rather than discontinuously. And it assumes that geopolitical conditions will be broadly stable. In 2026, all four of those assumptions have been severely tested — simultaneously, within the span of a single planning cycle.

THE OLD MODEL

Built for a stable world

- 5-year plan set annually
- Objectives fixed for 12 months
- Capability plan locked for 3–5 years
- Strategy reviewed once a year
- Assumes stable environment
- Responds slowly to disruption

THE NEW REQUIREMENT

Built for a volatile world

- North Star that endures
- 90-day sprint objectives
- Capability plan reviewed annually
- Strategy assessed quarterly
- Assumes continuous disruption
- Responds within weeks

THE COST OF STRATEGIC RIGIDITY

The cost of strategic rigidity is not theoretical. Organisations that built five-year capability plans in 2022 based on recruiting and training for content creation, data entry, administrative analysis, and first-draft knowledge work found those investments materially disrupted by generative AI before the plan reached its midpoint. Those that locked in five-year supply chain strategies without disruption scenarios found themselves exposed within eighteen months. In the WEF's 2025 survey, employers reported that the skills gap — the gap between what they planned to need and what they actually need — is the most significant barrier to business transformation, with 63% citing it as their primary challenge. That gap is, in large part, a planning failure. (*WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025 — employer survey data, January 2025*)

There is also a subtler cost. Organisations that operate under rigid long-term plans become culturally resistant to change. When the plan is the authority, evidence that the environment has moved becomes a threat rather than information. Leaders who have staked their credibility on a five-year direction are reluctant to acknowledge that it needs fundamental revision. Bain's Rigby and First, writing in Harvard Business Review in early 2026, found that organisations treating transformation as a routine exercise breed change fatigue, unsettle customers, and drain leadership resources — precisely because constant reinvention without stable purpose is as damaging as rigid adherence to an obsolete plan. The answer lies between these two failure modes. (*Rigby and First, 'Get Off the Transformation Treadmill', HBR, January-February 2026*)

THE CASE FOR STABILITY — AND ITS LIMITS

The argument for strategic agility is not an argument for strategic chaos. Organisations that pivot their direction at every market shift, that revise their values when under pressure, that abandon their purpose when it becomes inconvenient — these organisations do not become agile. They become incoherent. The answer to an unstable world is not an unstable organisation. It is an organisation with absolute clarity about what never changes, and the structural flexibility to adapt everything else.

Research across multiple traditions converges on this point. McKinsey's work on agile organisations identifies the North Star — the shared purpose and vision — as the anchor that makes rapid adaptation possible rather than destabilising. Harvard Business Review research by Liao and Zhu (2024) independently confirms that organisations anchoring strategies in enduring factors achieve more sustainable growth than those that react to every market shift. The speed of adaptation comes from clarity of direction, not from abandoning it. The two most important things an organisation can have in a volatile environment are an enduring sense of purpose and the structural capability to change everything else in pursuit of it. (McKinsey, 'The Five Trademarks of Agile Organisations'; Liao & Zhu, HBR, November-December 2024)

WHAT SHOULD NEVER CHANGE

MISSION

Why the organisation exists. The fundamental purpose it serves. This should not be revised because the environment changes — it should be the reason for adapting to the environment.

VALUES

The principles that govern how the organisation behaves — toward its people, its clients, and its community. Values that change under pressure are not values. They are preferences.

LONG-TERM DIRECTION

The destination, loosely defined. Where the organisation intends to be in five or ten years. Not a detailed plan — a compass heading. Directional enough to guide decisions, flexible enough to allow for re-routing.

WHAT MUST BE AGILE

Everything below the North Star must be designed to flex. The strategy that pursues the mission — the specific choices about where to compete, how to compete, and what to build — should be assessed at least annually and adjusted when the environment demands it. The capability development plan — what skills, systems, and leadership capacity the organisation is building — should operate on a maximum three-year horizon, reviewed annually, with specific attention to the AI obsolescence risk that is now reshaping skill requirements faster than any previous technology. And the operational objectives — the specific outcomes the organisation is committed to delivering — should operate on a 90-day sprint cycle, reset and recommitted to every quarter in light of what is actually happening.

"Agility and stability are not opposites. Stability of purpose makes agility of execution possible."

HK Strategy Advisory — The DALE Framework

The Three-Layer Strategic Model does not replace strategic planning. It restructures it. It separates the elements of strategy that should be enduring from those that must be agile, and assigns each the appropriate planning horizon and review cadence. The result is an organisation that holds a clear and stable sense of purpose and direction while retaining the structural flexibility to adapt its strategy, its capabilities, and its execution priorities at the pace of the environment.

THE THREE-LAYER STRATEGIC MODEL



LAYER ONE — THE NORTH STAR (ENDURING)

The North Star is the organisation's reason for existing. It encompasses the mission — why we do what we do — the values that govern how we do it, and the long-term directional aspiration that gives the whole organisation a shared destination. The North Star does not have a planning horizon. It is not reviewed quarterly. It is the constant against which everything else is measured. An organisation that changes its North Star in response to market conditions has not become agile. It has lost its identity.

LAYER TWO — THE CAPABILITY HORIZON (MAXIMUM 3 YEARS)

The Capability Horizon is the organisation's investment in what it needs to build — in its people, its leadership, its systems, and its culture — to be fit to pursue the North Star in the environment it actually faces. This is the layer where long-horizon thinking is legitimate and necessary. Building leadership capability takes time. Developing organisational culture is a multi-year endeavour. Creating technical infrastructure cannot be done in 90 days.

The Capability Horizon should operate on a maximum three-year window — not five — and must be reviewed and stress-tested annually. Three years is not an arbitrary figure. The disruptions of 2020, 2022, and 2025 each arrived within roughly two to three years of each other — suggesting that a three-year capability window is roughly aligned with the interval at which environmental assumptions are most likely to require significant revision. A two-year horizon may be too short to build meaningful leadership capability or cultural change. A five-year horizon has repeatedly been shown to outrun the predictability of the environment. Three years represents the practical balance point — long enough to build, short enough to remain revisable. The specific question that should be asked at every annual review: which of the capabilities we are building are at risk of being disrupted or made obsolete before we complete them? In 2026, that question must specifically address AI. The WEF's employer surveys suggest that organisations which built five-year capability plans without an AI obsolescence check are investing in a world that may not exist when the plan matures. (*WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025*)

LAYER THREE — THE EXECUTION SPRINT (90 DAYS)

The Execution Sprint is where strategy meets action. Every 90 days, the leadership team asks three questions: What are we committing to deliver in the next 90 days? Who owns each commitment? How will we know we have delivered it? The answers become the organisation's sprint objectives — specific, measurable, time-bound, and owned. At the end of each 90-day cycle, the team reviews performance, identifies what the environment has taught them, and resets the next sprint in light of both.

The 90-day sprint cadence is not arbitrary. It is calibrated to the pace at which significant changes in the business environment now typically become visible and actionable. It is short enough to remain responsive — a strategic assumption that proves wrong can be corrected within a quarter rather than embedded for a year. It is long enough to achieve meaningful progress on substantive objectives that require sustained effort rather than just reactive activity.

Critically, the sprint objectives should not be set in isolation. They should cascade from the North Star and the Capability Horizon — so that every team member can answer two questions: what is the organisation trying to achieve, and what is my specific contribution to that in the next 90 days? This cascade is the alignment mechanism that turns strategy from a boardroom document into an operational reality. McKinsey's survey of 2,190 respondents across 22 companies in agile transformations found that organisations linking employee goals to business priorities, investing in managers' capabilities, and differentiating rewards are 84% more likely to have performance-management approaches that employees recognise as fair and effective — though the research acknowledges this is based on respondent self-assessment. (McKinsey, 'Performance Management in Agile Organisations', McKinsey.com — survey of 2,190 respondents)

THE PERFORMANCE OF AGILE ORGANISATIONS — THE EVIDENCE

The evidence for strategic agility is substantial and comes from multiple independent research traditions. Writing in Harvard Business Review (November-December 2024), Professors Liao and Zhu found that in volatile environments, firms anchoring strategies in enduring factors are more likely to achieve sustainable growth — directly corroborating the Three-Layer Model. (Liao & Zhu, 'How to Avoid the Agility Trap', HBR Vol.102 No.6, 2024)

McKinsey's survey of 2,190 respondents found that organisations in agile units are 1.5 times more likely to report financial outperformance relative to peers, and 1.7 times more likely to outperform on non-financial measures. Analysis of 22 companies across six sectors found cost savings of 20-30% and operational performance improvements of 30-50% in successful agile transformations — with the important caveat that gains are only significant where agility is implemented holistically, not partially. (McKinsey, 'How to Create an Agile Organisation', 2017; 'Enterprise Agility: Buzz or Business Impact?', March 2020)

In the UK context, the CIPD's C-Suite Priorities 2025 report identified strategic workforce planning, workforce agility, and business-people strategy alignment as dominant priorities for UK senior leaders under uncertainty — precisely the dimensions the DALE Framework's Alignment and Leadership components address. (CIPD/Winmark, C-Suite Priorities 2025; CIPD, April 2025)

1.5x

more likely to report financial outperformance vs. non-agile peers

McKinsey, 2017
2,190 respondents

20-30%

cost savings observed in successful agile transformations

McKinsey, 2020
22 companies

3x

more likely to become top-quartile performers after agile transformation

McKinsey, 2021
2,190 respondents

"In highly volatile environments, firms anchoring their strategies in enduring factors are more likely to achieve sustainable growth."

Liao & Zhu, Harvard Business Review, November-December 2024

AGILITY IS OPERATIONAL, NOT JUST STRATEGIC

Strategic agility without operational agility is incomplete. An organisation can have the most sophisticated three-layer strategy in its sector and still fail to respond to disruption if its workforce model is rigid. The ability to flex the size, shape, and capability of the workforce in response to environmental change is as important as the quality of the strategic thinking that identifies what to do.

THE SKILLS OBSOLESCENCE CRISIS: WEF FUTURE OF JOBS REPORT 2025**BUILDING A WORKFORCE FOR AGILITY**

In its 2025 employer survey, the WEF identifies resilience, flexibility, and agility as the second most sought-after core skill among employers globally — directly behind analytical thinking, and ahead of leadership, creativity, and technological literacy. This is survey-based employer sentiment, not a hard measure of workforce capability — but its consistency across 1,000+ organisations in 55 economies gives it weight. Organisations that have experienced the three disruptions of the past five years have learned that technical skills can be automated and outsourced; the capacity to adapt, to remain effective under uncertainty, and to rebuild around new realities cannot. (WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025 — employer survey, January 2025)

Workforce agility has three components that organisations need to address deliberately. The first is flexible capacity — the ability to scale the workforce up and down in response to demand without the friction of lengthy recruitment or the disruption of large-scale redundancy. This means building a model where a proportion of capability is contracted rather than permanently employed, and where relationships with specialist providers are established before they are urgently needed.

The second is continuous reskilling — treating capability development not as an event but as a cadence. The organisations that navigate AI disruption best will be those that have established a rhythm of annual skills assessment, identifying which capabilities are at risk of obsolescence and investing in their replacement ahead of the disruption rather than in response to it. Employer surveys suggest 40% expect to reduce their workforce where AI can automate tasks while 85% simultaneously plan to prioritise internal upskilling. In the UK specifically, the CIPD's 2025 research on lifelong learning found that the scale and depth of skills change should not be underestimated, and that proactive employer investment in reskilling is essential to workforce adaptability. (WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025; CIPD, 'Lifelong Learning in the Reskilling Era', August 2025)

The third is leadership capability — the investment in equipping the people responsible for execution to actually lead. This is the dimension that is most consistently underprioritised in organisational capability plans, and its absence is the single most common reason that good strategies fail to deliver. People do not leave organisations. They leave under-equipped line managers. No strategy survives contact with an underprepared leader at the point of execution.

The DALE Framework is HK Strategy Advisory's proprietary methodology for building strategic agility into organisations. It does not claim to be a wholly novel discovery — it draws on and synthesises well-established organisational principles: the North Star concept from agile thinking, OKR methodology for alignment and execution, competency-led leadership development, and the 90-day sprint cadence from agile project management. What DALE provides is a coherent, integrated model that applies these proven concepts specifically to the context of SMEs, charities, and founder-led organisations — organisations that need structured strategic agility but cannot afford the overhead of enterprise-scale transformation programmes.

DIRECTION

D

Set a clear destination and build a strategy designed to adapt as the path changes. Direction separates what endures — the North Star — from what must flex — the specific strategic choices that pursue it. Direction without agility becomes rigidity. Agility without direction becomes chaos.

ALIGNMENT

A

Cascade strategic direction into objectives that connect every person's contribution to the outcome the organisation is trying to achieve. Alignment asks: does every team member understand what the organisation is trying to achieve, and do their objectives genuinely contribute to it? Strategy that is not aligned to execution is just aspiration.

LEADERSHIP

L

Equip the people responsible for delivery to actually lead. Leadership capability is the most consistently underprioritised dimension of organisational performance — and the most common cause of strategic failure. Technical competence does not translate automatically into leadership effectiveness. The L component addresses this gap through structured competency assessment and programme design.

EXECUTION

E

Deliver against commitments, monitor progress in real time, and course-correct as the environment demands. Execution is where the 90-day sprint lives. It is also where the DALE Strategy Canvas provides the practical instrument — the balanced, accessible, one-page tool that holds direction, alignment, and ownership together in a single view that any leadership team can maintain and use.

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FROM FRAMEWORK TO INSTRUMENT

The DALE Strategy Canvas is the practical instrument through which the Three-Layer Strategic Model is implemented. It is a single-page document — deliberately constrained to one page — that holds the organisation's capability horizon and 90-day execution sprint together in a format any leadership team can maintain, review, and update.

The design principle behind the Canvas is that the best strategic tool is one that gets used. Complex frameworks that require specialist knowledge to maintain, lengthy planning cycles to update, or significant time investment to review are abandoned within months. The Canvas is built for the reality of a 40-person SME or a 60-person charity where the leadership team has three hours per month — not three days — to review strategic progress. It should be reviewable in a single leadership team meeting. It should be updatable in minutes, not hours. And it should be immediately legible to a board member who is seeing it for the first time.

DALE STRATEGY CANVAS
Organisation: _____ Date: _____

CAPABILITY HORIZON (3-Year View, Reviewed Annually)

Strategic destination: _____

Capability gaps to close: _____

Leadership development priority: _____

EXECUTION SPRINT (90-Day Cycle, Reset Quarterly)

Sprint objective 1: _____

Sprint objective 2: _____

Sprint objective 3: _____

OBJECTIVE	KEY RESULTS	OWNER	STATUS	COURSE CORRECTION
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

The DALE Strategy Canvas - a proprietary HK Strategy Advisory instrument

THE TWO SECTIONS OF THE CANVAS

CAPABILITY HORIZON

The three-year view. What does this organisation need to build — in its people, its leadership, its systems — to be fit for the future? Reviewed annually. Stress-tested against AI obsolescence and environmental change every year.

EXECUTION SPRINT

The 90-day view. What are we committing to deliver this quarter? Who owns each commitment? What does success look like? Reviewed and reset every quarter in light of what the environment is telling us.

Use these eight questions as a strategic agility health check. If your leadership team cannot confidently answer them, you have identified the gaps you need to close. These are not theoretical exercises. They are the questions that the three disruptions of the past five years have made urgent for every organisation — regardless of sector, size, or structure.

EIGHT QUESTIONS EVERY BOARD AND LEADERSHIP TEAM SHOULD BE ASKING

- | | | | |
|----------|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Does our current strategy assume the world will remain broadly stable over its planning horizon? | 2 | When did we last stress-test our strategic assumptions against a major geopolitical, technological, or market shock? |
| 3 | Can we pivot our top three strategic priorities within 90 days if the environment demands it? | 4 | Is our capability development plan locked in for more than three years — and if so, does it account for AI obsolescence? |
| 5 | Do our people objectives cascade clearly from our strategic direction — and does every team member understand their contribution? | 6 | Are the people responsible for executing our strategy equipped to lead — not just technically competent in their previous roles? |
| 7 | Do we have a 90-day execution sprint in place right now, with named owners and measurable outcomes? | 8 | When did the board last review whether the organisation's strategic model is built for agility or built for stability? |

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR ANSWERS

If your leadership team can answer all eight questions with confidence and specificity — you have the foundations of a strategically agile organisation. If you can answer some but not others — you have identified the specific gaps to address first. If the questions themselves surface significant disagreement within the team — that disagreement is itself important data. Strategic agility begins with honest assessment of where the organisation actually is, not where the plan says it should be.

Nobody predicted the exact shape of the 2020 pandemic. Nobody predicted the pace at which generative AI would reshape the economics of knowledge work. Nobody predicted the specific geography or timing of the geopolitical shocks of 2025 and 2026. This is precisely the point. The future is not predictable in the detail that five-year plans assume. What is predictable is that it will be disrupted — in ways that cannot be fully anticipated, on timelines that will not align with planning cycles.

The organisations that will perform best in this environment are not those with the most detailed long-range plans. They are those with the clearest sense of purpose, the most disciplined 90-day execution rhythm, the most honest annual capability review, and the most agile leadership at every level. As the Stanford Social Innovation Review argued, what organisations need today is a strategy that breaks free of static plans to be adaptive and directive — one that emphasises learning and control rather than prediction and compliance. (*Stanford Social Innovation Review, 'The Strategic Plan is Dead. Long Live Strategy.'*) They will not be better at predicting the future. They will be better at responding to it.

The DALE Framework — Direction, Alignment, Leadership, Execution — is not a prescription for a specific organisational structure or a fixed set of planning templates. It synthesises proven principles — North Star thinking, OKR-based alignment, competency-led leadership development, agile sprint execution — into a cohesive model designed for the practical realities of SMEs, charities, and founder-led organisations. It is a way of thinking about the four dimensions that determine whether any organisation, of any size, in any sector, can translate its purpose into performance in a world that will not stay still long enough to be planned into submission.

A NOTE ON EVIDENCE AND METHODOLOGY

The WEF data cited throughout this paper is drawn from employer surveys — sentiment-based projections rather than hard economic measures. McKinsey agile research is largely based on self-reported data from executives in organisations that have undergone agile transformations, which may reflect survivorship and confirmation bias. These are acknowledged limitations. The paper presents this evidence as indicative of consistent directional trends, not as proof of guaranteed outcomes. Readers are encouraged to assess the evidence in the context of their own organisations.

"The five-year plan is not dead because planning is wrong. It is dead because the world has stopped cooperating with it. The answer is not less strategy. It is better strategy built for the world we actually live in."

Hassan Khan, Founder, HK Strategy Advisory

HK Strategy Advisory: DALE Framework Review

HK Strategy Advisory offers a structured Strategy & Alignment Review built on the DALE Framework, designed for SMEs, charities, and founder-led organisations. We assess Direction, Alignment, Leadership, and Execution against a scored framework, deliver a DALE Strategy Canvas, and provide a prioritised action plan for building strategic agility.

- Strategy & Alignment Health Check - from GBP1,250
- Prioritised Action Plan - from GBP2,500
- Full DALE Framework Review - from GBP4,500
- Ongoing Strategic Advisory Retainer - from GBP1,000/month

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From complexity to clear action.

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