

Strategic Agility as a Competitive Advantage in Airlines - Case Study: Egypt Air

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Abstract

Strategic agility has become one of the important tools that help airlines survival, increasing competitiveness, and achieving excellence in a changing and volatile labor market, that achieve a competitive advantage. The prime objective of this research is to illustrate the importance of strategic agility in achieving competitive advantage through studying its impact on innovation, service quality, delivery reliability, process flexibility, and cost leadership. 300 questionnaires were distributed on a random sample of employees in Egypt air, while 256 questionnaires were found usable for analysis. The results showed that Egypt air is characterized as an agile company. Results also indicated that strategic agility affects greatly the competitive advantage in Egypt air, where it affects greatly delivery reliability, followed by innovation, then process flexibility, service quality and finally cost leadership.

Keywords: Agility, Agile Organization, Agile Workforce, Strategic Agility, Competitive Advantage.

Introduction

Organizations face a lot of challenges, because of rapid and fluctuating changes in the work environment (Sherehiy et al., 2007; Kettunen and Laanti, 2008; Idris and Al-Rubaie, 2013; Sohrabi et al., 2014; Qin and Nembhard, 2015). These changes are due to technological development, globalization, innovation, creativity, and changing customers' preferences (Swafford et al., 2006 and Tseng and Lin, 2011; Sherehiy and Karwowski, 2014). Companies have to cope with these changes and increase their competitiveness to survive within the market (Alavi and Abd-Wahab, 2013 Young, 2013; Sherehiy and Karwowski, 2014; Lee et al., 2015).

The term agility appeared when the work environment was influenced by rapid changes (Alavi and Abd-Wahab, 2013). consequently, companies should review their objectives, policies, and respond rapidly and with the flexibility to work environment requirements. This helps with the emergence of the so-called "strategic agility" (Ganguly et al., 2009; Hosein and Yousefi, 2012). Strategic agility becomes a vital factor for success and sustainability in the work environment (Trinh-Phuong et al., 2012), as well as the pursuit of excellence, work processes development, and then achieving competitive advantage (Idris and Al-Rubaie, 2013). Today, Companies seek to provide the best value for its customers more quickly than its competitors (Sukati et al., 2012).

Agile organizations are innovating new and fast ways to respond to changes through the development of the company's strategies, using technology, exploitation of human resources and improving their skills (Zain et al., 2005; Hosein and Yousefi, 2012), quick meeting of customers' needs, quick entry and exit in alliances (Oyedijo, 2012), offering new services in a timely manner (Shah and Ward, 2003), take advantage of opportunities and minimize the risks in a changing work environment (Qin and Nembhard, 2015).

The research aims to discuss the importance of strategic agility in achieving a competitive advantage in airlines (Case study: Egypt Air) by examining its impact on innovation, service quality, delivery reliability, process flexibility, and cost leadership.

Literature Review

The concept of strategic agility

There are a number of strategic agility concepts, but these concepts are all involved in reflection the quick response to changes in the labor market (Zain et al., 2005 and Abu-Radi, 2013). The term agile was first used in 1991 by researchers at the Iaccoca institute at Lehigh university (Latham, 2014). The concept of agile organizations has been associated with fast decision-making, flexibility and quick responding to market (Kharabe, 2012). According to Sherehiy and Karwowski (2014: 467-468), Agility is "organization's capability to flexible and rapid response to changes in the internal and external business environment for exploiting all available opportunities". Strategic agility refers to "The ability to continuously adjust and adapt strategic direction in core business, as a function of strategic ambitions and changing circumstances, and create new product, services, new business models and innovative ways to add value for a company" (Audran, 2011, 47; Vecchiato, 2015, 29). Whilst Shin et al. (2015) depicted that strategic agility means, the ability to produce new and right products at the required time and price.

The importance of strategic agility as a competitive advantage

The work environment is characterized by quick changes and intensive competition (lawler and Worley, 2006; Young, 2013). As a result, organizations need to be developed in order to ensure survival against its competitors by having a workforce that has the skills and capabilities to cope with these changes (Idris and Al-Rubaie, 2013). As Young (2013) mentioned, strategic agility is the best way to compete and survive in the market. For the organization to be agile, it must adapt to unforeseen changes in the work environment (Charbonnier-Voirin, 2011; Young, 2013; Tikkanen, 2014), global competitive in market, providing a variety of quick service (Abu-Radi, 2013), processes development, change management and innovation (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2009). Additionally, acquiring and sharing knowledge (Cegarra-Navarro et al., 2016), teamwork and building a strong relationship with customers (Tikkanen, 2014). Besides, financial support, human resources planning (Hosein and Yousefi, 2012), training on advanced technology (Alavi and Abd-Wahab, 2013), creating new ways to perform tasks, new ideas (Zain et al., 2005), possession of qualified workers (Qin and Nembhard, 2015), flexibility and effectiveness (Audran, 2011).

Agile organization means not only continuing responding to the changes, but it also means the ability to exploit the available opportunities offered by changes (Gallagher and Worrell, 2008; Izza et al., 2008; Trinh-Phuong et al., 2012; Ashori et al., 2015; Lee, 2015), so as to keep its existence in the market and increase its competitiveness (Young, 2013).

In the light of the continuing changes in the labor market, organizations should have employees with high knowledge and skills (Qin and Nembhard, 2015), A so-called agile workforce who is characterized by the ability to deal appropriately with changes in a timely manner, as well as their ability to benefit from the advantages of the change (Alavi and Abd-Wahab, 2013). Latham (2014) has pointed out that, the agile workforce must be characterized by intelligence, quick responding to changing customers' needs and market conditions, acquiring new knowledge, cooperation between employees and management, quick decisions making, and using advanced technology. Sohrabi et al. (2014) Clarified that the agile workers are expressing agile performance at work, which can be identified in six key dimensions, are dealing with unexpected situations, solving problems collectively, flexibility, learning tasks and work procedures, adapting to others, and dealing with the pressures of work.

According to Morgan and Page (2008), factors of organizations' success in changing labor market are represented in applying strategic agility successfully (Santala, 2009), which becomes the hallmark in contemporary organizations (Narasimhan et al., 2006; Trinh-Phuong et al., 2012; Nejatian and Zarei, 2013). As Sukati et al. (2012); Tikkanen (2014); Ashori et al. (2015) and Luthria and Rabhi (2015) mentioned, strategic agility is an important tool to achieve competitive advantage in changing labor market. Strategic agility helps organizations dealing with the changes quickly and efficiently (Naylor et al., 1999; Izza et al., 2008; Zhang, 2010; Tallon and Pinsonneault, 2011; Sukati et al., 2012; Winby and Worley, 2014), quality improvement (Sohrabi et al., 2014), effective using of advanced technology, achieving excellence in the labor market (Hosein and Yousefi, 2012), reducing costs, effective using of organization resources, increasing productivity, providing a variety services in a timely manner (Kováč et al., 2012). It helps also meeting the customers' needs quickly, increasing customers satisfaction, reducing unimportant tasks (Tseng and Lin, 2011), increasing competitiveness (Erande and Verma, 2008), taking advantage of available opportunities in the market (Santala, 2009; Kettunen, 2010; Chen, 2012; Kharabe, 2012; Ashori et al., 2015).

Besides, flexible dealing with internal and external changes (Agarwal et al., 2006; Bosco, 2007; Lim et al., 2007; Young, 2013; Sohrabi et al., 2014), and making quick and correct decisions (Doz and Kosonen, 2008; Minin et al., 2014). Economist Intelligence Unit (2009) and Brusset (2016) also added that Strategic agility concerns with the way in which organizations survive in the times of turbulence and crises facing the labor market. Denning (2013) and Latham (2014) also confirmed that strategic agility will not be achieved under routine and bureaucracy.

Moreover, Tikkanen (2014) indicated that there are four factors to identify if the organization implements strategic agility or not. These factors are responding, efficiency, flexibility, and speed. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit (2009), Agile business is characterized by fast decision-making, outstanding performance, continuous improvement accountability and credibility, empowerment, effective and strategic management of human resources, decentralization, accessing to the right information at the right time. Economist Intelligence Unit (2009) Also noted that there was a study conducted at the Massachusetts institute of technology (MIT) showed that the agile organizations increased revenue by 37%, and achieved 30% profits higher than non-agile organizations.

Methodology

Research design

The researcher depended on the questionnaire for statistical data collection about the sample characteristics, to what extent Egypt Air is characterized as agile organization, and the impact of strategic agility as the independent variable on achieving competitive advantage through (innovation, service quality, delivery reliability, process flexibility, cost leadership) as dependent variables. To achieve the study objective, the researcher proposed a model that shows the impact of applying the strategic agility on achieving competitive advantage.

Research model and hypotheses

Study model illustrates the impact of strategic agility on achieving competitive advantage. This model has been developed after reviewing previous studies related to this subject by Chen (2012); Oyedijo (2012); Abo-Radi (2013); Idris and Al-Rubaie (2013) and Young (2013). The model includes six variables, one of them is independent (strategic agility), and five are dependent (innovation – service quality – delivery reliability – process flexibility – cost leadership) as depicted in figure (1).

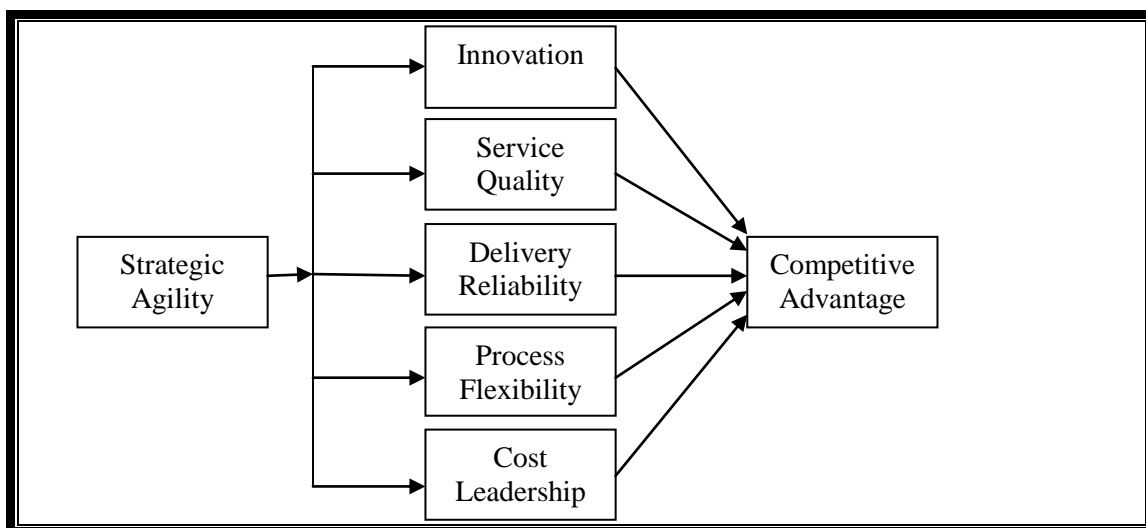


Figure (1) Study Model

Study hypotheses

The study aims to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Applying of strategic agility has a significant effect on achieving competitive advantage in Egypt air.

H1a: Applying of strategic agility has a significant effect on innovation in Egypt air.

H1b: Applying of strategic agility has a significant effect on service quality in Egypt air.

H1c: Applying of strategic agility has a significant effect on delivery reliability in Egypt air.

H1d: Applying of strategic agility has a significant effect on process flexibility in Egypt air.

H1e: Applying of strategic agility has a significant effect on cost leadership in Egypt air.

Research instrument

The study employed a questionnaire as an instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: 1) Demographic information, 2) Strategic agility, and 3) Elements of achieving competitive advantage. **Section one** includes the demographic and work information of the respondents (Gender, Age, Level of Educational, Job Tenure). **Section two** (Strategic Agility) Includes 19 items of a five-point likert-type rating scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) modified from the scale developed by Worley et al. (2014) and Lee (2015). This section assesses the organization based on four agility routines as follow:

A) Strategizing (S): Means stable identity and flexible intent that seeks to build a series of short-term strategic advantages (was measured by 4 items),

B) Perceiving (P): Means sensing, interpreting, and preparing responses to signals from the competitive environment (was measured by 5 items),

C) Testing (T): Means designing, resourcing, and executing effective tests of potential responses to environmental threats and opportunities (was measured by 5 items), and

D) Implementing (I): Means effectively and efficiently institutionalizing the organizational response in operations of the firm (was measured by 5 items).

Section three (Competitive Advantage's Elements) includes 18 items of a five-point likert-type rating scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) modified from the scale developed by Chen and Paulraj (2004) and Abu-Radi (2013) as follow:

A) Innovation: Refers to the capability of an organization in developing new Services, processes and working Methods (was measured by 4 items),

B) Service Quality: Refers to the capability of an organization in providing services that conform to established specifications, are reliable and provide overall satisfaction to the customers (was measured by 5 items),

C) Delivery Reliability: Refers to the capability of an organization to deliver on time service consistently (was measured by 2 items),

D) Process Flexibility: Refers to the capability of an organization to provide a large variety of services within its existing facility (was measured by 4 items), and

E) Cost Leadership: Refers to the capability of an organization to provide services at competitive prices (was measured by 3 items).

Sample and data collection

300 questionnaires were distributed to a random sample of employees in Egypt air, while 256 questionnaires were retrieved with a percentage 86.4% and were found usable for analysis.

Data analysis

To achieve the objective of the research, the statistical techniques used in data analysis include Cronbach alpha to assess the reliability, frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviation, Spearman’s correlation, and simple linear regression

Reliability

According to Nunnally (1978), the reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered "acceptable" in most social science research. The Cronbach Alpha reliability for variables and the tests indicated that the reliability coefficients for variables were above 0.86, which shows that the instrument is reliable for being used.

Results and discussion

Demographic information

Table (1) indicates that the majority of the respondents were males by 83.2%; 50% of respondents reported being from 36 to 45 years old. As for the level of education, there were 95.3% of respondents who had a Bachelor degree. Years' number of Job Tenure varied among the respondents. There were 32.4% of respondents who had 6-10 years of experience, also 27% had 11-15 years of experience, and along with 25% had 3-5 years’ experience.

Table (1) Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

	Freq.	%		Freq.	%
1- Gender			2- Age		
Male	213	83.2	less Than 25	11	4.3
Female	43	16.8	25-35	83	32.4
Total	256	100	36-45	128	50
			More Than 45	34	13.3
			Total	256	100
3- Level of Education			4- Job Tenure		
Bachelor	244	95.3	Less Than 3 Years	23	9
Master	6	2.3	3-5	64	25
Doctoral	1	0.4	6-10	83	32.4
Diploma	2	0.8	11-15	69	27
Others	3	1.2	More Than 15	17	6.6
Total	256	100	Total	256	100

Descriptive results

Table (2) shows the mean and standard deviation for all items of strategic agility in Egypt air. The mean score of strategic agility is 4.13, with standard deviation of 0.95. This result means that Egypt Air is an agile company, adapting to the changing business environment, responding rapidly, and flexible to this environment.

Table (2) Mean Rating of Strategic Agility

Items	Mean	SD
1-organization has a unifying purpose / mission, other than profitability and growth.	4.11	1.13
2-organization develops strategies with flexibility in mind.	4.10	1.21
3-organization has a culture that embraces change as normal	4.21	1.09
4-organization has core values that reflect a change ready organization	4.24	.95
5-organization spends a lot of time thinking about the future	4.23	.92
6-organization puts as many employees as possible in contact with the external environment , especially with customers	4.45	.75
7-organization allows information to flow freely from the outside to departments and groups where it is most valuable	4.16	.93
8-organization shares financial and business strategy information with all employees	3.88	1.25
9-organization has formal mechanisms to connect senior management with employees at all levels of the organization	4.42	1.03
10-organization encourages innovation	4.25	1.05
11-organization has enough budget so that employees can develop new products or better ways of working together	3.93	1.32
12-organization is capable of shifting its structure quickly to address new opportunities	4.25	1.10
13-organization has flexible budgets that respond to marketplace changes	3.95	1.17
14-organization regularly reviews learning from change efforts	4.43	.91
15-organization considers the ability to change a strength of the organization	4.57	.50
16-organization rewards seniority more than performance	3.70	1.46
17-organization pays for the skills and knowledge that contribute to performance	3.50	1.43
18-organization has a well-developed change capability	4.12	1.17
19-organization encourages managers and employees to develop the leadership skills of their direct reports	4.06	1.27
Total mean/standard deviation of strategic agility	4.13	.95

Table (3) indicates the mean and standard deviation for all items of competitive advantage in Egypt air. The mean score of competitive advantage is 4.17, with standard deviation of 0.84. The mean score of innovation element achieved 4.19, with a standard deviation of 0.96, service quality element achieved 4.26 with standard deviation of 0.90, delivery reliability element achieved 4.09, with standard deviation of 1.26, process flexibility element achieved 4.15, with standard deviation of 0.97, and finally cost leadership achieved 4.16, with standard deviation of 0.80.

Table (3) Mean Rating of Competitive Advantage

Items	Mean	SD
1-organization has the ability to develop new methods at a high rate compare with our competitors	4.21	1.14
2-organization has the ability to develop new features in existing services at a high rate compared with our competitors	4.17	1.12
3-organization has the ability to develop new service technology at a high rate compared with our competitors	4.02	1.21
4-organization has the ability to develop new working methods at a high rate compared with our competitors	4.36	.87
<i>Total mean/standard deviation of innovation</i>	4.19	.96
1-organization has the ability to provide services of high level of quality compared with our competitors	4.27	.99
2-organization has the ability to provide services with high level of performance compared with our competitors	4.29	.96
3-organization has the high level of service quality as perceived by the client compared with our competitors	4.20	1.13
4-organization has the ability to provide a high level of conformance quality compared with our competitors	4.28	1.02
5-organization has the ability to provide a high level of service reliability compared with our competitors	4.26	.99
<i>Total mean/standard deviation of service quality</i>	4.26	.90
1-organization has the ability to reliably deliver services on time compared with our competitors	4.11	1.21
2-organization has to promptly handle client complaints compared with our competitors	4.08	1.31
<i>Total mean/standard deviation of delivery reliability</i>	4.09	1.26
1-organization has the ability to rapidly change service mix compared with our competitors	4.16	1.10
2-organization has the ability to rapidly change services volume compared with our competitors	4.06	1.28
3-organization has the ability to provide broad service mix within same facilities compared with our competitors	4.21	1.11
4-organization has the ability to rapidly handle clients' needs compared with our competitors	4.19	1.09
<i>Total mean/standard deviation process flexibility</i>	4.15	.97
1-organization has the ability to offer lower priced services compared with our competitors	4.24	1.08
2-organization has the ability to provide services at lower internal costs compared with our competitors	4.21	.98
3-organization has the ability to reduce overhead costs compared with our competitors	4.02	1.14
<i>Total mean/standard deviation of cost leadership</i>	4.16	.80
<i>Total mean/standard deviation of competitive advantage</i>	4.17	.84

Spearman correlation analysis

According to the results of the Spearman correlation between strategic agility and competitive advantage's elements in the table (4), The value of Spearman correlation coefficient between strategic agility and competitive advantage's elements was 0.771. This shows that there is a strong positive correlation between the two variables. The table also shows that most closely element related to strategic agility is the delivery reliability as it achieved 0.821 as a value of Spearman correlation, then innovation that has achieved 0.812, followed by process flexibility that has achieved 0.795, then service quality that has achieved 0.613, and finally cost leadership that has achieved 0.576.

Table (4) Spearman Correlation between Strategic Agility and Competitive Advantage's Elements

competitive advantage's elements	Correlation Coefficient	Sig
Innovation	0.812 ^{***}	000
Service Quality	0.613 ^{***}	000
Delivery Reliability	0.821 ^{***}	000
Process Flexibility	0.795 ^{***}	000
Cost Leadership	0.576 ^{***}	000
Competitive Advantages	0.771 ^{***}	000

Simple linear regression analysis

Table (5) depicts the Simple linear Regression analysis between strategic agility and competitive advantage elements. Results show that strategic agility clearly affects competitive advantage elements by 46.3% (F Value= 88.654; Sig=.000). Strategic agility greatly affects innovation with 42.6% (F Value= 145.113; Sig=.000), furthermore strategic agility affect service quality with 36.7% (F Value=31.397; Sig=.000), delivery reliability with 56.9% (F Value= 14.756; Sig=.000), likewise on process flexibility with 39.2% (F Value= 102.975; Sig=.000) and finally, strategic agility affect cost leadership with 30.4% (F Value= 189.436; Sig=.000).

Table (5) Statistical Characteristics of the Simple Linear Regression

	Adjusted R Square	F value	Sig.
The impact of strategic agility on innovation	0.426	145.113	.000
The impact of strategic agility on service quality	0.367	31.397	.000
The impact of strategic agility on delivery reliability	0.569	14.756	.000
The impact of strategic agility on process flexibility	0.392	102.975	.000
The impact of strategic agility on cost leadership	0.304	189.436	.000
The impact of strategic agility on Competitive Advantages	0.463	88.654	.000

Conclusion and recommendations

The application of strategic agility is one of the significant tools to achieve the competitive advantage within the volatile and rapid changing business environment. It also helps the organization to overcome the crises during the recent period and regain its balance and position in the global labor market. This makes it imperative for Egypt Air to expand in the application of strategic agility to be the more agile company, and able to compete and survive in the work environment through speed, efficient and highly flexible responding to changes.

According to the study results, Egypt air considers an agile company by putting future strategies to deal with the change, flexible thinking, and the ability to cope quickly with change. Moreover, the interest in encouraging employees to communicate and research in the external business environment, as well as effective communication between workers and management encouraging them to express their opinion, creativity, and innovation. It is worth mentioning that Egypt air can achieve competitive advantage in the global market through innovation, service quality, delivery reliability, process flexibility, and cost leadership.

The study also showed that, there is a relationship between the application of strategic agility and achieving competitive advantage through the five elements (innovation, service quality, delivery reliability, process flexibility, and cost leadership), so the strategic agility affect achieving competitive advantage through its effect on innovation, delivery reliability, process flexibility, service quality and cost leadership in Egypt air. Based on these results, Egypt air should focus on training and continuous learning to develop employees' skills and experience. Egypt air should also focus on the continuous improvement of the services provided, as well as the level of quality. In addition to, using advanced technology in all departments. Furthermore, Continuously carrying out research markets to identify the desires and needs of customers. Moreover, Egypt air should provide a variety of services with fit different prices that different categories of customers.

Since this study discussed the impact of strategic agility on achieving the competitive advantage in Egypt Air through the five elements, Future studies should address other airline companies operating in Egypt, and comparing its results with the results of Egypt Air to determine the amount of competition among them. Future studies can also examine the impact of the training programs provided by Egypt Air on the success of strategic agility application and its impact on the company's reputation in the business environment. This study also focused on the viewpoint of employees of Egypt Air. On the other hand, it is possible to study the viewpoint of their customers because they are important.

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الرشاقة الإستراتيجية مميزة تنافسية في شركات الطيران (دراسة حالة: شركة مصر للطيران)

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الملخص العربي

تعد الرشاقة الإستراتيجية أحد الأدوات الهامة لمساعدة شركات الطيران علي البقاء في بيئة العمل المتغيرة والمتقلبة وشديدة التنافسية، وكذلك مساعدتها في زيادة القدرة التنافسية وتحقيق التميز في سوق العمل، وبالتالي تحقيق ميزة تنافسية. وتهدف الدراسة إلي توضيح أهمية الرشاقة الإستراتيجية في تحقيق ميزة تنافسية من خلال دراسة أثرها علي الإبداع، التسليم، مرونة العمليات، جودة الخدمات، التكلفة. اعتمدت الدراسة الميدانية علي توزيع ٢٥٠ استمارة استقصاء علي عينة عشوائية من العاملين في شركة مصر للطيران، وتم الاعتماد علي تحليل ٢١٦ استمارة صالحة. وقد توصلت الدراسة إلي أن شركة مصر للطيران تتميز بأنها شركة رشيقة. كما أوضحت النتائج أن الرشاقة الإستراتيجية تؤثر بشكل كبير علي تحقيق ميزة تنافسية في شركة مصر للطيران، حيث أنها تؤثر بشكل كبير علي التسليم، ثم الإبداع، مرونة العمليات، جودة الخدمة، وأخيراً التكلفة.

الكلمات الدالة: الرشاقة، المنظمات الرشيقة، قوة العمل الرشيقة، الرشاقة الإستراتيجية، الميزة التنافسية.