Oil Cured Tuna, Mayo, Celery, Toasted Rye, Oh My!

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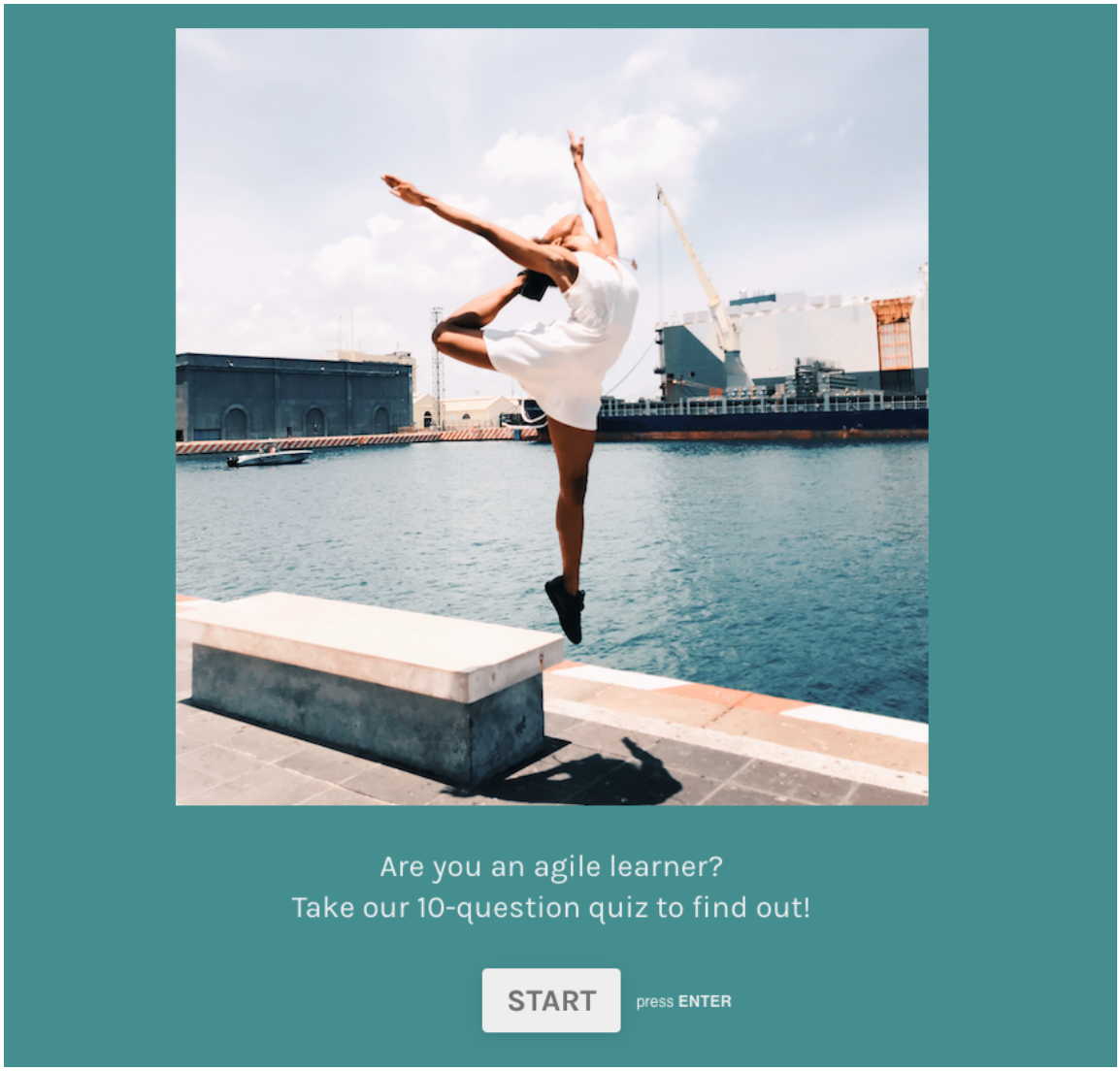
In his article, *The Tuna Fish Sandwich Test*, Korn Ferry CEO Gary Burnison writes that “As much as people talk about being ‘lifelong learners,’ few really make the effort. It’s one of those little fibs they tell themselves or say at job interviews.” Burnison explains how he sometimes asks a “quirky question” in the middle of an interview to learn about a candidate’s learning agility—like, “How do you make a tuna fish sandwich?” This lets Burnison glimpse how a job candidate thinks, and how they handle the unexpected, the random, the accidental. He writes that learning agility is “the willingness and ability to apply lessons from the past. Or, as I like to say, it’s knowing what to do when you don’t know what to do.”

At the end of his article, Burnison offers a quiz to score your learning agility. I’ve been obsessed with on-the-job learning (and learning for its own sake), for as long as I can remember, and with risk management for 23 years. Until today, however, I didn’t realize how closely these two obsessions are sandwiched so beautifully. Since none of us can accurately forecast the future, or predict with absolute accuracy how humans, systems, and Mother Nature will behave, we need skills that will help us act and adapt when we really have no inkling what to do. Sound familiar?

During countless interviews with risk leaders who have varying amounts of experience, I’ve repeatedly heard a yearning to “know intuitively” what to do when a novel risk materializes. And I recently heard a nonprofit leader tell me that he wished his organization’s risk manager could provide a “definitive answer to my questions, every time.” Maybe we should give ourselves a collective break and acknowledge that being in learning mode is more important than being a know it all.

With myriad organizations and risk leaders in mind, I’ve created my own version of a *Learning Agility Quiz for Risk Champions*. I invite you to take my quiz to test and evaluate your learning agility.



What agile learning comes down to are the very skills practiced by the best risk champions. To quote from Burnison, “Learning-agile people are insatiably curious and engaged with the world around them. They don’t just default to the ‘same old’ solutions and ‘status quo’ problem-solving tactics that worked in the past. They’re willing to go against the grain of what they know how to do and prefer to do. Why? They constantly seek to get better and to learn new skills and ways of behaving. They eagerly apply fresh approaches, ideas, and solutions.”

So, how do you make a tuna fish sandwich? With curiosity, mental acuity, and comfort with ambiguity—light on the mayo.