The Future of Workplace Learning
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Solving the Learning Dilemma

In 1991, Harvard Business School professor Chris Argyris wrote, “Any company that aspires to succeed in the tougher business environment of the 1990s must first resolve a basic dilemma: Success in the marketplace increasingly depends on learning, yet most people don’t know how to learn.” Fast-forward 30 years and swap in “the 2020s,” and these words likely ring true for many executives today.

To be clear, learning is as high a priority as ever for corporate leaders. Before the pandemic, learning and development (L&D) efforts aimed at reskilling and upskilling workforces ranked among global CEOs’ top concerns. COVID-19 has accelerated existing trends in remote work and automation and shined a spotlight on digital skills gaps in organizations.

Despite concern at the top and significant investments in training each year, many organizations are failing to meet employees’ learning needs. Gallup data shows that only 4 in 10 employees strongly agree that they have opportunities at work to learn and grow.

So where do things go wrong?

For Argyris, the learning dilemma demonstrated that organizations make two critical mistakes: First, they define learning too narrowly, and second, they fail to reflect on how internal behaviors and thought patterns block effective learning.

Over the past year, L&D teams have had to pivot quickly and reshuffle priorities in order to meet the needs of remote workforces, from moving in-person learning models online to thinking beyond a focus on technical skills to the behavioral “human skills” at the core of virtual communication and collaboration. Along the way, companies are finding that some traditional systems of learning must shift to meet new needs.

This MIT SMR Executive Guide examines this shift and explores opportunities for leaders to solve the decades-old learning dilemma facing organizations. In the pages that follow, you’ll find advice and insights from executives at leading learning companies across the globe.

Our experts look at how learning can serve as a valuable tool for CEOs to drive change and unlock execution. Likewise, leaders across business units can align with L&D teams to identify focus areas in the organization that further strategic goals.

This Executive Guide also delves into where unlearning plays a role in shaping the future. As executive teams and learning leaders strive to create more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organizations, they must also be mindful of addressing internal behaviors and system dynamics that work against this progress.

Success factors for companies depend on strategic alignment with organizational goals and leaders’ openness to embracing new approaches to supporting a talent pipeline built for the 21st century. This report will help leaders think beyond outdated definitions of learning, learn from failure, and adapt and change internal behaviors to meet the challenges of the new normal.

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Developing the skills and infrastructure for lifelong learning was at the top of my agenda before the pandemic. But as the general economic fallout from the pandemic and the impact on jobs and job displacement become clearer, the issues of upskilling and reskilling are also moving up the agenda for corporations and executives across the world. Governments play a role here, as we have seen in the case of Singapore, which offers a model for government-sponsored initiatives aimed at promoting skill development and lifelong learning. But the corporate role is vital. That's in part because the experience of work itself is a major developer of skills, and corporations have an intimate view of skill requirements. In some cases, they also have a finely honed way of developing skills. Indeed, in a recent survey, 94% of business leaders said they expect their employees to pick up new skills on the job (which represents a sharp uptick from 65% in 2018).1

But a particular nuance of this skills challenge is shifting the balance of initiatives and resources to where they are needed most. Right now, skill development programs are well established for highly skilled jobs. That's not enough — the significantly larger proportion of often lower-skilled and lower-paid jobs requires more skill development. These jobs are typically the most vulnerable to automation and are where churn will most likely take place. It's no surprise executives estimate that, on average, roughly 40% of workers will require reskilling of six months or less.2 Importantly, for those in lower-paid work, the transitions associated with this churn are particularly hard, since they require access to often scarce resources — time, money, and attention.

As a humanistic psychologist, I start from the position that most adults (whatever their pay grade) are motivated to learn and develop skills in order to build resilience against current challenges and guard against future shocks. They do this by investing time and resources (sometimes significant amounts of both) to upskill in their current job — or, better still, they reskill in the hope and anticipation of securing a better, higher-value job. As Matt Sigelman, CEO of the labor market platform company Burning Glass Technologies, recently remarked to me, “People have an irrepressible desire and ability to move up.”

This human drive will turn out to be crucial in the face of the massive job churn ahead. So the real motivational kicker for corporate executives is to create a learning infrastructure that enables and encourages people to harness this innate human drive.

To do so, executives have to take three actions: (1) Make developmental pathways visible so that employees know how to connect to higher-paid work; (2) leverage the new learning habits by making low-cost training available at scale; and (3) more broadly invest in skill development opportunities not only for current employees but for the wider supply chains and communities as well.
Harness Visible 'Escalators of Mobility'

For many people, on-the-job experience itself is what helps them develop new skills. But it turns out that jobs don’t all have equivalent skill development potential. Some are like escalators — the experience of being on them moves you up. But others are cul-de-sacs — dead-end jobs that take you nowhere. The challenge for workers is distinguishing the cul-de-sacs from the escalators.

And while upward mobility may be more widely available or highly visible in certain career paths (such as professional jobs), that’s not always the case in lower-skilled jobs, where escalators can be particularly crucial. To understand this better, a recent study traced the trajectories of 100,000 U.S. employees and, encouragingly, found that half of them moved up into higher-wage jobs. These “gateway” jobs to the escalators included customer service, sales, advertising sales, computer support, vocational nursing, welding, and machining. These are midlevel jobs on a journey to a higher-paid destination.

What these gateway jobs often have in common is the development of foundational skills. These are often “human skills,” such as listening, communication, empathy, judgment, and decision-making. It turns out these skills play a key role in unlocking the value of technical skills. Indeed, without them, individuals cannot entirely utilize their technical skills. And part of the importance of these foundational skills is that, unlike technical skills, which often have a short shelf life, they are valuable over the course of a lifetime of work.

It is possible for companies to both identify and utilize these escalators and gateway jobs. Take IBM, which has developed and now deploys a chatbot called Myca (short for My Career Advisor). This uses a range of real-time internal and external data (including data from IBM’s HR system, data from internal opportunity boards, and external labor market data) to converse with employees about their current and future skill development. Using natural language technology, Myca describes employees’ current skill profile, shows them gateway jobs, and highlights how the skills gap can be filled. Or take telecommunications company AT&T, which is investing more than $200 million annually to develop a suite of training programs for higher-value digital jobs — particularly those with hard-to-source, in-demand skill sets. When they followed the trajectory of participants, they discovered more than 4,200 career pivots. Importantly, rather than going outside for skills, AT&T was able to fill more than 70% of open jobs with internal people who had upskilled.

There are actions that companies and executives can take now: Focus on the trajectories of lower-paid roles, and identify those gateway jobs that provide escalators to better, higher-paid work. Leaders can also target development spending on those foundational skills that will unlock technical skills, and on hard-to-source, in-demand skill sets.

There is an opportunity now to leverage new learning habits to really boost the skills agenda.

Invest In Leveraging New Learning Habits

For those roughly half of employees who moved up in the study of 100,000 U.S. workers, escalator jobs really helped make a difference. But that was rarely enough. A key factor that separated those who moved up from those who didn’t was some level of extra skills training — either provided by their companies or undertaken by the workers themselves. How do we make such skills training available in a low-cost, scalable way to more individuals who need it?

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up an opportunity in this regard as people have become more familiar with online learning delivery and virtual collaboration with work colleagues. This experience has also sparked growth in the digital learning market and secured wider acceptance — both at the corporate and individual levels — of the value of online skills training.

I spoke with Jeff Maggioncalda, CEO of the online education platform Coursera, at the beginning of the pandemic about how needs were changing. Even then, he saw that corporate-sponsored learning was growing fast, along with individually sponsored learning. The Coursera platform was amplifying learning new skills and creating greater skill elasticity. At that point, enrollment in China, Japan, and Italy was already up by over 300% — with courses on public health dominating. Since then, it’s become ever clearer to Maggioncalda and his team that new learning habits are being created amid a new way of working.
As he put it, “There has been an amazing amount of sharing and a new spirit of accepting new things.” People across the world are embracing digital and being more innovative, creative, and collaborative.

**Partner in Building the Whole Skills Ecosystem**
Governments like Singapore’s are able to look across the whole skills ecosystem of a region or country in order to understand the dynamics of the labor market and know where best to invest in supporting job transitions and training. Inevitably, many executives take a more insular approach — by focusing solely on their own company and their current employees. I believe this corporate insular view is a lost opportunity, particularly in countries where governments are not executing a coordinated skills development strategy. This insular view can also work against the long-term success of the company. In a tight labor market for skills, the pipeline of future employees (and consumers) is as important to companies as their current employees. And when we take a wider look at this opportunity issue, there is the question of corporate social responsibility. Billions of people are in need of better, higher-paying, higher-mobility jobs. Companies can play a crucial role in looking beyond their own boundaries and current employees to the wider community in order to confront this desperate need on a global scale.

It was this wider perspective that led the executive team at Microsoft to launch a global initiative in early 2020 aimed at bringing more digital skills to 25 million people worldwide. To do that, leaders made use of their own resources while building new partnerships. Internally, they worked with job posting data from LinkedIn and the skills profiles emerging from millions of developers on code-sharing platform GitHub to build live data streams. This information created a deep understanding at a granular level of in-demand jobs while profiling and clustering skill sets. The result was a navigation system for people motivated to upskill. Then, to support those on the escalator, the team at Microsoft worked with a range of suppliers to provide free access to learning modules, low-cost skill certifications, and free job-seeking tools. In addition, Microsoft donated $20 million in cash grants to support nonprofit organizations worldwide that are committed to supporting upskilling.

As we move forward from the pandemic and contend with an economic recession, the issue taking center stage will be how workers — across the whole pay and skills continuum — are motivated and able to learn new skills. There is an opportunity now to leverage new learning habits to really boost the skills agenda. To make this happen, executives need to encourage employees by mapping those escalator jobs that could make a real difference, and make significant investments in providing resources that support those who are motivated to learn.

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The forces of disruption reshaping the future of work moved at a faster pace than ever during the past year. With the pandemic making it unsafe for many people to work in person, companies around the globe turned to remote work and accelerated the use of automation technologies such as AI and robotics. COVID-19 brought about a reallocation shock, which economists at the University of Chicago estimate has caused three new hires for every 10 layoffs.\(^1\) They also predict that 32% to 42% of COVID-19-related layoffs will be permanent.

To avoid mass long-term unemployment, we must prioritize and pour efforts into preparing workers for the jobs of the future. Increasingly, these are the kinds of jobs that focus on uniquely human skills that current technologies cannot simulate — things like empathy, problem-solving, collaboration, and communication. Increasing such skills not only helps workers but also has real business implications: Human skills make companies stronger.

The World Economic Forum’s “Future of Jobs Report 2020” shows that workers recognize this. Topics like mindfulness, meditation, gratitude, kindness, and listening moved into the top 10 areas of focus among employed people, supplanting artificial neural networks, cloud computing, and general statistics.\(^2\)

Employers are also recognizing the need to increase their development initiatives for so-called soft skills, which are now also known as power skills or human skills. But businesses face a fundamental challenge: Most worker training was designed for teaching rote and technical skills. Traditional workplace learning programs were built to look like schools and universities, with teachers lecturing students. Even today this remains the case, with most programs following the same model.

Developing human skills is a completely different ballgame, where seminars and instructor-led workshops won’t suffice. People develop skills like empathy, communication, listening, and the ability to provide constructive feedback by being put into situations where they have to put these skills to use.

This is a primary reason I focus on peer coaching, in which colleagues have guided one-on-one hourlong conversations, either in person or via video, on an ongoing basis. They ask each other questions, listen intently, offer ideas, and make plans to take a concrete action before their next session.
These types of interactions — between true peers, with neither participant acting as the “teacher” — do the most to develop human skills. In my work helping companies address skill gaps with peer coaching, I’ve identified the fundamental learning differences between technical and human skills. (See “Technical Skills Versus Human Skills.”)

In this article, I examine what these differences mean for learning leaders and offer four ways peer coaching can enhance skill development.

**Exploring Knowledge Within**

Developing “hard” or technical skills requires the transference of knowledge from the expert, such as a trainer or course instructor, to the learner. Human skills, however, come largely from within. Individuals need to explore their own experiences and emotions and put them to use.

For example, to develop greater empathy, the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, recommends radical listening, which requires individuals to channel the “ability to be present to the unique feelings and needs a person is experiencing.”23 For many people, if not most, the ability is already there, deep inside — it just needs to be tapped into. It means making yourself vulnerable as well and opening up about your feelings and challenges.

There’s certainly a role for instructors, such as showing someone how to display empathy or presenting research about the benefits of effective communication. But to develop these skills, people need to look within and bring more of themselves to the surface in their interactions with others. In peer coaching sessions, that’s exactly what they do.

**Creating a Positive Flywheel Effect**

Technical skills such as writing code or querying a database have foundational basics and best practices that translate both to self-paced learning and group settings. Lectures and large group workshops lean more toward a consistent, one-size-fits-all method for how to perform a technical skill. But human skills play out differently for each person based on individual psychology.

Also, unlike with coding, people can’t practice human skills on their own. These skills are inherently social. Peer coaching is designed for these different learning needs. In a one-hour session, participants talk and listen an equal amount of time. With no third person there, only the listener can respond empathetically and provide feedback — and each has to find his or her own way to do so.

This creates a positive flywheel effect. Peer coaches build relationships with each other around acceptance and openness. That, in turn, can increase the release of oxytocin, which “promotes feelings of devotion, trust, and bonding,” as a psychologist explained to NPR.4

Such increased trust then leads colleagues to further explore and develop their human skills together.
Boosting the Process of Unlearning
When it comes to many technical skills and new competencies, people begin by learning the basics from scratch. But for social and emotional learning (SEL), that’s impossible. As a set of guidelines for school educators on SEL explained, “Students rarely come to class having repeatedly practiced an incorrect version of the multiplication table, but they may have become well schooled in not waiting their turn or not listening carefully to others.”

By adulthood, we’ve had decades to learn and ingrain negative thought patterns and behaviors that can block human skill development, such as making biased assumptions about other people or being quick to anger when presented with criticism.

As a peer coaching process progresses, people unlearn continuously. Feedback from a partner helps them discover flaws in their own thinking. A simple question from a peer coach, such as, “Have you considered looking at it this way?” can help someone realize that they’ve jumped to conclusions or made assumptions. Similarly, participants offering what they think is helpful feedback may receive a response, such as, “Well, that suggestion doesn’t quite work for me, and here’s why.” Peer coaching triggers a process of reflection — which research shows is crucial for learning and unlearning.

Measuring Through Feedback
I’m often asked how to measure peer coaches’ development. While technical skills such as software design or data science often have objective metrics to benchmark against, human skill prowess is much more subjective.

Some employers use 360-degree assessments to help gauge their employees’ development in these arenas. A group of World Bank economists recommends assessing soft skills through a series of exercises that take a full hour per person. But no matter what, managers won’t be able to look for a number or grade to summarize, with adequate context, just how well their employees are doing.

What is clear is that the more people put these skills to use, the more they grow. Our team has seen people’s feedback from managers, colleagues, and reports vastly improve the more they engage in peer coaching over time. Those one-on-one conversations — which take place with new people through different pairings every few months or so— help turn human skills into daily habits. So do the commitments people make during each session to subsequently take action, such as having a tough conversation with a manager or apologizing to a colleague. Knowing that their peer coach will hold them accountable, 80% of participants in our peer coaching sessions follow through on their plans. Here, the learning-by-doing process extends beyond the sessions themselves.

The future of human skill development at work requires a new model. When peer coaching is part of this, it creates a drumbeat that keeps an organization, and the people vital to its success, moving forward.

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Executing the CEO’s Agenda Through Targeted Learning

To execute on strategic goals and create competitive advantage, companies must embrace a learning function that looks different from what we know today.

BY JAMES FULTON AND TODD M. WARNER

Executing the CEO’s agenda almost always requires people within the organization to adopt new ways of seeing, thinking, and acting. Success requires learning at scale, with speed, in the places where it will matter most. This is easier said than done. For most companies, organizational lethargy — rooted in the familiarity of the status quo and legacy ways of working together — poses a significant risk for execution.

Learning is a valuable tool for CEOs to drive change. But in order to be deployed in a strategic way and unlock execution, learning needs to look different from what we know today. We’ve gathered perspectives and insights from dozens of CEOs and board members of large organizations in different industries across the globe and found that most CEOs lack a playbook for driving strategic learning. In this article, we propose the use of targeted learning as a vehicle to resolve key execution problems and social challenges, and to drive strategic change.

While traditional approaches to learning focus on individual aptitude and skill, targeted learning focuses on the ways individuals work together — in other words, on disrupting and rewiring social norms. It is a process that improves the way people collaborate in the course of day-to-day execution.

CEOs should take four actions to advance their agendas through targeted learning:

1. Develop a holistic view of strategy execution challenges.
2. Use targeted learning to intervene in the places that matter most for the CEO’s agenda.
3. Measure impact through leading met-
rics linked to execution.

4. Position the learning function to address strategic problems from the outset.

1. **Develop a holistic view of strategy execution challenges.** Leaders often define problems so that they can be easily solved, which is, of course, convenient. But this can lead organizations to oversimplify and focus too narrowly. Teams often spend their energy and time on new initiatives and project deliverables rather than understanding the complexity of the overall execution problems that reside within the whole system. To reverse course, leaders must define problems at the outset, holistically and systemically, so that they don’t become disparate initiatives isolated from strategy execution.

One Australian financial institution learned this lesson the hard way. After investigating misconduct in Australia’s financial services industry, a banking industry royal commission reached some painful conclusions. The final reports and recommendations it released in 2019 put a spotlight on risk culture and compliance that led to a surge in demand for relevant training. As a result, one bank required employees to complete 60 hours of pass/fail e-learning modules on risk each year. However, despite this effort, the risk profile of the bank didn’t improve. It had defined the problem too narrowly. So instead of focusing on knowledge and compliance with training requirements, the organization’s leadership shifted to define the problem more holistically. What would an actual risk culture look like in teams — in terms of where they focused, how they cooperated, and what behavior they modeled and tolerated — if the company were to embody this ideal?

A holistic view enables organizations to look at the full scope of patterns, behaviors, and ways of working that need to change using targeted learning. They can pivot from looking at risk as a problem of individual competence to a more holistic problem of social collusion and legacy norms.

2. **Use targeted learning to intervene in the places that matter most for the CEO’s agenda.** Targeted learning works well for addressing priorities with significant social elements. Organizational work, after all, is social: It requires groups of people to work together, often in teams or across reporting lines, to make things happen. Here, targeted learning excels because it helps to quickly reshape how people work by looking at sources of power and why they currently work together in the ways they do.

Let’s return to the Australian banking institution. After leadership reframed the problem set with a holistic approach, the bank used targeted learning to address the social problems of risk within intact teams. One month each quarter was designated Team Risk Month, during which two team meetings were dedicated to robust dialogue and engagement around provocative prompts, videos, and short cases related to potential team risks. Team leaders were trained to lead these dialogues, and team members identified remedies and actions related to their work and then tracked and reported them. Using a technology platform to centralize activities, the bank developed tools, nudges, and targeted risk check-ins related to the team’s commitments and the organization’s risk profile. Training time on risk dropped by more than 50%. More important, teams took action on local priorities and changed their norms and, as a result, reduced organizational risks.

In another example, the new CEO of a natural resources company assumed his post wanting to drive a major culture change — what he called a “step-up culture,” in which individual employees felt compelled and enabled to take action and be accountable to make a difference in their daily operations. A holistic examination revealed that this agenda was being thwarted, unintentionally, by the company’s internal audit function. Internal auditors had deep professional knowledge around identifying and exposing corporate risks and problematic issues. However, this function’s legacy ways of working, which involved seeking out and punishing mistakes, were directly opposed to the kind of step-up culture that the CEO wanted to promote.

Insights into the social dynamics at play were key to tailoring the targeted learning approach. Rather than running a leadership program or culture change...
workshops, the learning team worked with the internal audit function to revamp core processes. The targeted learning intervention reoriented the team to focus on using its organizational influence to become “pollinators” of excellence, spotting and amplifying best practices rather than merely searching for mistakes. Changes to this process affected what they looked for, with whom they interacted, and the questions they asked. The refined approach also reshaped how they reported and telegraphed their findings.

The change in this lone functional process had a profound social impact. Teams looked forward to internal audits and were eager to learn from the auditors and have their best practices celebrated and taught elsewhere within the organization. This use of targeted learning, through another function’s core processes, did more to enable a step-up culture than a decade of leadership training would have accomplished.

3. Measure impact through leading metrics linked to execution. The results of targeted learning need to be measurable, long lasting, and strategic. Traditional measures of learning are less effective for this task because they focus on either satisfaction (for example, “To what extent was that program a good use of your time?”) or lagging indicators (for example, annual culture surveys or 360-degree assessments).

The intended impact of targeted learning must be identified from the start, along with a clear understanding of how it will drive the CEO’s agenda. Impact is defined by working backward from these chief priorities. Learning professionals need to understand what must shift to enable execution and where such changes will show up. Rarely does everything or everyone need to change to enable a CEO agenda. Sometimes, as the next example will explore, targeted learning aims to shift a set of applied behaviors in a critical, middle-management layer.

The CEO of a very distributed industrial manufacturing business wanted to advance the company’s safety agenda. Site leaders were critical to executing this priority. Research revealed that the best-performing site leaders received culture survey ratings from their teams that were 10 points higher than the average. These individuals also outperformed peers in both customer satisfaction and performance impact by double digits, and their sites were 37% safer.

Targeted learning research sought to go beyond describing behaviors in the abstract in order to detail how these leaders executed their roles day to day. The learning team determined that the most outstanding site leaders did two things differently: They spent almost 45% of their time in the field, teaching their teams; and they ran more engaging and social “prestart” meetings with their teams before beginning the day’s work. The learning team now had the metrics that could be pinpointed and assessed in real time. Site leaders were taught about the findings by their leaders (as a way to make this a part of their work, not adjacent to it). From then on, they were assessed every week on two things: how they were spending their time (based on calendar audits), and the quality of time in field and prestart meetings (using data from short team surveys). Over time, site leader efficacy in these two areas became a leading indicator for the safety function and their own performance, as well as overall operational excellence.

Effective targeted learning needs to translate the holistic view of strategy execution problems into vital measures that will underpin the design and approach of a given intervention. The learners themselves must have accountability for driving a return on the learning investment. People learn behaviors in organizations through many more avenues than we imagine, but individual culpability for changes is vital for impact. Measures for targeted learning need to offer transparency that allow people to see progress taking shape in their day-to-day work.

4. Position the learning function to address strategic problems from the outset. Most corporate learning functions focus primarily on building individual knowledge and skills. Targeted learning requires a shift in focus toward addressing
systemic issues and building lasting change in organizational norms.

As an outfit designed to drive organizational change, the team responsible for targeted learning should include experienced learning professionals who are skilled at diagnosis, design, and facilitation. But such teams also benefit from drawing on business leaders with other backgrounds who “get” culture and the organization’s context. It is the combination of provocative thinking about behavioral change and learning, matched with the deep know-how and understanding of how things really work, that allows a targeted learning team to flourish.

The effectiveness of this group depends upon its ability to understand how to create leverage in the real social system of work that will advance CEO priorities quickly. The CEO needs to challenge this team to bring fresh thinking and an embedded architecture for enabling learning in the flow of real work. People behave the ways that they do, and learn, through myriad mechanisms within organizations; the targeted learning function needs to have authority to challenge the legacy ways of working that get in the way of the CEO’s agenda. Since the function is directly pursuing the CEO’s agenda, chief executives need to provide sponsorship to the group to address the critical leverage points that will drive impact and improve execution.

Targeted learning serves as a catalyst for transformational change: to address the tricky social problems that make or break world-class strategy execution and impede CEO agendas. By fostering this type of learning, CEOs can create organizations that can navigate the tumult and chaos of the modern era and leverage approaches to learning that are truly differentiating.

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How HR Leaders Are Preparing for the AI-Enabled Workforce

Awaiting AI’s prevalence, companies’ upskilling strategies range from doing nothing to empowering employees to set their own career paths.

BY THOMAS H. DAVENPORT AND GEORGE WESTERMAN

The promise — and threat — of AI is real. But the impact on jobs has not yet arrived in most organizations. As recently as 2017, headlines such as “Bosses Believe Your Work Skills Will Soon Be Useless” (from the The Washington Post) were common. Oxford University researchers argued in 2013 that 47% of U.S. jobs were at risk of loss to automation. MIT launched its institute-wide task force on the future of work in 2018. Leaders around the world began to consider how their organizations would be different when thousands of their employees’ jobs are automated away.

Fast-forward a few years, and the story is different. As with many technologies, reality did not keep up with the hype — at least not right away. The analysts, managers, and industry gurus forgot the first law of digital innovation: Technology changes quickly, but organizations change much more slowly. Many people are working with smart machines in their daily work, but few have lost their jobs to them.

Job change, however, is more likely. A 2021 McKinsey study estimated that 6% of workers — particularly those in low-wage roles — may need to find new jobs because of automation and the pandemic. A 2018 Deloitte survey found that 82% of AI adopters expected moderate or substantial job changes for their employees in three years.

The experience of the past decade shows the difficulty of predicting the timing and effect of technology on workers and skills. In November 2020, the MIT Task Force on the Work of the Future’s final report stated, “In the two-and-a-half years since the task force set to work, autonomous vehicles, robotics, and AI have advanced remarkably. But the world has not been turned on its head by automation, nor has the labor market.”
The delay of the day when AI and robots eat jobs has toned down the level of hype in the media and reduced the level of concern for many managers and workers. But some leaders are still considering how to prepare their companies, and their workers, for changes that will come as organizational data feeds and machine learning algorithms mature.

To understand how organizations are preparing for the future of their workforces, we reached out to HR and talent heads in several large companies. We asked them how they are getting ready for AI-enabled changes in the occupations and skills in their organizations. By far, the most common answer we heard was, “We’re not doing much to get ready for AI.” Some HR leaders and their companies, however, were taking steps to prepare for the time when the changes begin to happen. Few are yet actively using AI to change processes and jobs, but they are helping their workers get ready for a time when AI will be much more prevalent than it is today.

In this article, we explore four workforce strategies companies are pursuing. We start by describing the most common response from HR leaders. And although we don’t fully agree with it, it’s not irrational.

**Strategy 1: Doing Nothing**

There is a case to be made for doing nothing to prepare workers for AI-related changes to jobs. When we asked HR leaders at a defense contractor, for example, why they were doing nothing, they offered three logical reasons:

1. The company has many other competing priorities in the near term. Is it worth investing in something that is so long term and uncertain in its impact?
2. Job changes and automation are moving a lot more slowly than the experts predicted. We’ll be able to adjust as the changes come. When jobs do change, most of the time it’s task augmentation or new skills rather than layoffs. That kind of change is less difficult to accomplish and easier to plan for.
3. There’s so much uncertainty around the prognostication that we’re likely to be wrong. Then the company will need to do the more real-time adjusting anyway.

We would argue, however, that it is possible to predict some changes in jobs from AI, or at least to better equip employees to prepare for more generic job changes. Upgrading skills can be a time-consuming process, so we would also point to organizations that are taking action now. The next three workforce strategies describe the more proactive approaches some companies are taking to prepare for an uncertain future.

**Bottom line:** You may decide that it makes sense to wait to prepare your employees for AI but not to ignore it. Even if you are taking it slow, keep a close eye on trends so that you can act quickly when necessary.

**Strategy 2: Building Digital Skills**

Some companies that want to retrain or upskill workers aren’t sure what specific skills will be required for jobs of the future, but they are confident that those skills will be digitally oriented. Amazon, for instance, has committed to spend $700 million on retraining to ensure that its employees have the skills they will need to thrive in an increasingly digital job market. The company’s primary focus is the third of its workers in distribution centers, its transportation network, and nontechnical roles at headquarters. The examples it provides are retraining workers in fulfillment centers (which are more vulnerable to automation) for jobs as IT support technicians, and helping nontechnical corporate workers learn software engineering skills.

Similarly, leaders at DBS Bank in Singapore provided employees with seven digital skills, including digital communications, digital business models, digital technologies, and data-driven thinking. Deloitte has focused on making its professionals “tech savvy” — assuming that in an AI-oriented business environment, virtually every employee will need to understand how technology works and fits with their jobs. All three companies believe that, whatever changes happen to future jobs, employees — and their employers — will be better off if they are more skilled at digital technologies.

**Bottom line:** Regardless of how quickly or extensively AI will change jobs, nearly all jobs will do more with technology over time. Giving people role-based training to attain the right level of digital
skills can help better prepare them to accept change and even innovate.

**Strategy 3: Predicting Job Trends**

Predicting the nature of future jobs is, of course, difficult or impossible to do with precision. And even if predictions are possible, they will probably differ substantially from job to job. Nevertheless, some companies are embarking on approaches that predict the future of either all jobs in the organization, those that are particularly likely to be affected by AI, or jobs that are closely tied to future strategies.

JPMorgan Chase has announced a $350 million investment in reskilling related to AI-related job changes, and the bank is being both predictive and granular about the initiative. It’s working with researchers from MIT and elsewhere to understand — based on a “suitability for machine learning” (SML) assessment — which skills and jobs are most likely to be replaced by AI. This will help the bank plan for changes in those jobs, and help workers gain the skills they need to succeed in their modified jobs or transition to new ones.

Some companies are making specific job predictions based on their strategies or products. In Europe, a consortium of microelectronics companies is devoting 2 billion euros to train current and future employees on electronic components and systems. General Motors is focused on training its employees to manufacture electric and autonomous vehicles. Verizon is focused on hiring and training data scientists and marketers to expand its 5G wireless technology. SAP is focused on growing employees’ skills in cloud computing, artificial intelligence development, blockchain, and the internet of things. These industry-specific changes are easier predictions to make than for business in general, although they, too, could go awry.

**Bottom line:** Predicting the occupational impacts of AI is difficult, but there are methods that can help, including the SML rubric developed by our colleagues in the MIT Initiative on the Digital Economy. The goal should not be predicting change for every job, but rather identifying the jobs most likely to change so you can proactively drive change at the pace that’s right for you.

**Strategy 4: Helping Workers Choose Their Own Futures**

Unilever is taking a different approach to preparing workers for future jobs. Instead of trying to predict which jobs will change, the company is helping workers take more ownership of their own paths. Employees are empowered to make the changes they want to make in their jobs and careers rather than having to wait to react to changes imposed upon them. Unilever is facilitating this process by describing alternative career progressions. The company is helping workers choose target occupations and understanding the skills needed to attain them. Then the company is providing a wide range of options — both internal and external training — to gain those skills.

One of the most popular HR tools at GE Digital shows workers which jobs in the company are natural next steps from the ones they have now. Employees can look privately at the tool to see possible paths they can follow, skills they may need to acquire, or even positions that are open. This helps employees feel less “stuck” in their current roles and feel that they have more control over their positions in the company.

**Bottom line:** Change is happening rapidly to all jobs, whether or not it’s driven by AI. By helping workers own their career progressions, you can make them more productive now and more likely to stay with you for the long term.

**Taking the Bull by the Horns**

The raging bull of machine learning has turned out to be slower and calmer than many people predicted a few years ago. But any rancher knows you should never turn your back on a bull, no matter how docile it seems. While the slow pace of AI has caused some leaders to relax, others are taking the bull by the horns. We highlighted three ways they are actively preparing for the future rather than waiting for the future to spear them.

The interesting thing is that most of these HR leaders and general managers are not focusing on AI, even when they are considering the effects that AI might have on occupations. They are helping their workers get ready for the future of the company. The
changes are not about AI or COVID-19 or any specific new technology. They’re about understanding that companies need to be more agile in skilling and staffing, and their ability to adjust to change. This is a mindset that all HR and talent leaders should have, regardless of whether major threats are coming soon.

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A Paradox No More: Investing in Automation and People

Automation is here, but so too is a deeper appreciation for investing in learning and skills development for human workers.

BY MICHAEL B. HORN AND C.J. JACKSON

This time, the robots really are coming. For the first time, the majority of robots ordered last year in North America won’t be going to automotive factories. Instead, companies in the consumer goods, pharmaceutical, and biomedical industries are responsible for a significant upturn in orders.

The COVID-19 pandemic made new standards for social distancing critical, and that, in turn, has empowered companies to turn to robots. Employers across the country turbocharged their investments in technology and automation. These accelerated investments, combined with a crippling recession and mass layoffs, disproportionately affected low-wage workers, women, and underrepresented minorities.

Scientist and fiction writer Isaac Asimov once wrote, “You can't differentiate between a robot and the very best of humans.” The fear of automation, if not robot overlords, has been a fixation of business analyses and science fiction for generations. So with U.S. employers embarking on a clearer path toward machines, it might be easy to read these developments as a dire sign for American workers. In particular, some victims of robots would seem to be investments in areas like upskilling and education. The presumption might be that building a better bot gives you more bang for your buck.

Except the opposite appears to be happening. Automation is here, but so too is a deeper appreciation for and investment in things like upskilling, learning and development, and education for all workers.

There’s a simple explanation underlying this apparent paradox.

Robots don't program themselves. Managers are required to design and oversee processes that use technology. In most organizations, that means there's an urgent need to upgrade talent. Robots and other forms of automation also require regular maintenance, tweaks to their performance, and other important quality-control measures that require a human touch. And managers are becoming all too aware of the implicit bias that can creep into the algorithms that undergird artificial intelligence — and the need for humans to proactively monitor for and correct it.
To be clear, automation in the form of robots, artificial intelligence, and more will take over tasks that are part of routines that are repeatable and rules-based. In many cases that will mean that automation replaces parts of jobs: According to McKinsey, by 2030, “around 15% of the global workforce, or about 400 million workers, could be displaced by automation.” But for many organizations, automating some tasks will both enable them to do more and make it more critical that they upskill their workforces.

Confronting Talent Scarcity
An organization has two ways to upgrade its technical and managerial talent. The first is to hire talent into the organization — whether newly minted college graduates or highly skilled individuals from other organizations. The second strategy is to deeply invest in the upskilling and reskilling of one’s own workforce.

Over the past generation, companies have gone the first route. There are twin challenges, however, that make this strategy increasingly untenable.

Technical talent is scarce. A study by Korn Ferry found that by 2030, the global talent shortage could reach more than 85 million people. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics reports that computer and IT occupations are likely to grow much faster than the average of other occupations over the next decade, driven by the rise of cloud computing, big data, and information security. And that was before COVID-19 accelerated the time frames of investments in technology.

Given that technical talent is scarce — and now even more in demand — it’s also expensive. That means that employers need a better solution. Many are turning to the second strategy — investing in the skills of one’s own workforce — to stay relevant in an increasingly digital world. The old guard is crumbling, in other words. And the frailties of the traditional workforce-education system are more apparent. As a result, we should expect more employers to arrive at this point in the years to come.

As one of us (Michael) wrote in a previous article drawing from Clayton Christensen’s Theory of Interdependence and Modularity, in the early years of a new paradigm — in order to succeed — product and service providers must integrate across all of the unpredictable and performance-defining elements of the value chain.

For many employers, the faulty assumption in the value chain is clear: Traditional education and workforce systems in which colleges and universities educate students and give them a foundation of knowledge and skills that can last a lifetime are no longer realistic. Instead, with rapidly digitizing and automating businesses, to remain competitive, employers must integrate backward and pay for education and upskilling themselves.

This newer path is not only more affordable and more tenable — it is also more strategic and predictable. If your company is actively educating and upskilling its workforce and fully builds this effort into its strategy, it is less likely to be caught flat-footed by broader changes in technology. This creates more stability in the pipeline; you won’t need to recruit a new workforce for new tasks, because you will have a continuously adapting and improving one.

The evidence suggests this is happening. As of June 2020, 42% of companies had stepped up their upskilling initiatives since the pandemic started. A whopping 88% of learning and development leaders surveyed in May 2020 expected their organization’s spending on education to increase in 12 to 18 months. Sixty-six percent agreed that their function had become a more strategic part of the organization.

What does this look like on the ground? At Guild Education, where we both work, the number of students we support rose 25% in the aftermath of the pandemic — all funded by forward-thinking employer partners seeking a clear return on their investment.

The ROI of Upskilling
Major companies have realized the strategic benefits of upskilling.

As has been reported widely, Walmart, for example, is opening health care clinics across the country. With more than 4,000 stores in the United
States, staffing these clinics with qualified health professionals will be critical, which is why Walmart works with schools like Penn Foster to prepare its retail workers for optician and pharmacy technician roles. Given the vast shortage of health professionals across the country, reskilling its own employees creates a more predictable path forward for a role critical to the company’s strategy.

Fast-casual restaurant chain Chipotle has also stepped up its investment in its employees during the pandemic by expanding its debt-free college program. A major driver of this initiative? The insight that an investment in education benefits makes employees 7.5 times more likely to advance to management roles within the organization. That adds significant predictability to what otherwise is a significant human resource challenge critical to the chain’s strategy. Even in an industry poised to see more automation — and, yes, potentially robots — there’s recognition that a deeper investment in workers creates a better pool of talent to move a business forward.

Discover Financial Services is another organization that provides employees with access to education assistance for strategic reasons. The Discover College Commitment program, in which employees can enroll in a fully paid online bachelor’s degree program, saw more than a 25% increase in enrollment in 2020 compared with 2019. The program’s offerings are tailored to important competencies for the business and skills for the future of work. With it, employees of the credit card company have options to pursue degrees and skills training in business management, business administration, software design, computer and network security, and other increasingly in-demand fields.

More broadly, there’s an emerging dual track of investment in training and new technology. Last year, the Society for Human Resource Management surveyed its membership and found that 75% of HR professionals were either maintaining or increasing their training budgets — numbers that tracked almost identically with investments in new technology, such as automation. These investments aren’t only in the technical skills to work with these new technologies, but also in skills like critical thinking and communication, which often develop through comprehensive degree programs rather than short-form training.

These are some of the reasons why robots, which may finally be here, aren’t — and really shouldn’t be — a harbinger of something negative. In theory, more technology will mean more efficiency for America’s employers and, perhaps, in a post-pandemic world, a safer one. The early signals, however, are that we should not fear new robot overlords. Instead, the sharpest, most strategic companies are making a simultaneous investment in people who can power progress.

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Building the Link Between Learning and Inclusion

Culture and inclusion are critical elements in creating a learning environment.

KEYANNA SCHMIEDL, INTERVIEWED BY DEBORAH MILSTEIN

Countless companies today are promoting and facilitating lifelong learning opportunities for their employees and contributors. Amid a broader social reckoning about race and equity, inclusion’s critical role in creating a learning environment is under a brighter spotlight. Wayfair, an e-commerce company specializing in home goods, has actively embraced inclusion initiatives — even at a work-from-home distance.

With a background in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across industries, including higher education, banking, and health care, KeyAnna Schmiedl joined Wayfair in 2019, becoming the company’s global head of culture and inclusion in 2020. Schmiedl considers DEI to be inherently interconnected with organizational development, and this perspective informs her systemic and strategic approach to effecting positive change.

Deborah Milstein, associate editor at MIT Sloan Management Review, spoke with Schmiedl about her work on culture and inclusion. What follows is an edited and condensed version of their conversation.

MIT SLOAN MANAGEMENT REVIEW: Where do culture and inclusion fit in your organization, and where do you think they should fit?

SCHMIEDL: People are making the connection that diversity, equity, and inclusion are not a set of initiatives that operate in a silo. It only works when you’re talking about informing the policies, practices, and procedures of what happens at work every day — and, depending on your business, how you interact with your customers, how you represent your stakeholders and suppliers, and so on.

For me, it naturally makes sense that DEI is foundational to everything that happens at work, and it’s how companies build a culture of inclusion. Being able to marry culture and DEI more tightly is how colleagues understand why I show up in learning and development [L&D] or talent acquisition meetings — that it makes sense for me or my team to be there.

In a way, we operate more like consultants, as opposed to some of the traditional thinking around HR: “Come in, do this for us, execute this training, and that will solve our problems.” In DEI and L&D, we’re executing initiatives, yes, but we’re also acting as consultants for the business to assume accountability for delivering shared outcomes.

Ultimately, when leading DEI or L&D initiatives — like any other business initiative — somebody needs to be accountable for it. Was it rolled out correctly, with the right information and the right level of engagement? The DEI team is not exclusively responsible for hiring and representation. Everybody who is part of the business,
who's part of hiring decisions, is accountable for those outcomes.

**What’s the relationship between culture and inclusion and organizational learning? Should they be integrated?**

SCHMIEDL: I’d love to see more partnership and integration between L&D and inclusion. There are plenty of opportunities where having the expertise of both groups can bring better solutions. For instance, my team recently collaborated with our L&D partners on the terminology used in performance reviews. By analyzing this data, we noticed that the biggest opportunity area for most women was to improve their confidence.

We have a competency in our performance model that maps to communication and persuasion, so you would expect low scores there for employees regarded as lower in confidence. But the scores didn't match that pattern, which helped us understand that “confidence” was being used more as a catchall term without an official definition. But in order to give somebody direct feedback that they can act on, they have to understand what, specifically, they're being asked to improve.

Our L&D team offered to polish up existing training with some data around improving confidence, with examples of things people could try out: “Tell yourself that in the next meeting, you’re going to speak up at least three times.” But for women of color, often the knock is that we're coming off as overconfident, so “Speak up more” would be incongruous guidance for some people. L&D took that lens of inclusion to broaden the discussion around what advice to suggest, with consideration given to how folks identify — be it race/ethnic considerations or introversion/extroversion.

Additionally, time was spent orienting participants to a shared responsibility in building confidence, pointing to a model in which the individuals, their team, and their manager all contribute to their success and moving away from the idea that confidence is solely the responsibility of the individual. This was done with an understanding that it does not work anymore to create one single training that we say is for everyone, without considering if it truly is the training for everyone. Generic advice may not work in certain scenarios, depending on your identity or dimensions of diversity.

For me, the connection between learning and DEI just feels seamless — which is the way it should work, not at cross-purposes or in an adversarial way. Since the racial reckoning that was sparked in the U.S. in 2020, people are gaining awareness that experiences aren't the same across the board. And now they're wondering, “What does that change actually look like in L&D or HR management or operations?” And that's where DEI can easily plug in and help.

**How has L&D contributed to broader culture and inclusion efforts?**

SCHMIEDL: We recently shifted to using a set of “people principles” that are meant to describe how we operate at our best and that inform our competency model. Previously, we had deferred to a set of core values, which we found were really a mix of behaviors, beliefs, and how-tos that were too murky to drive behaviors.

L&D has been a huge part of managing this change process and helping to embed this new language into their trainings. Our teams have been able to communicate really well in parsing the nuances of what specific terms mean, and L&D has been a really trusted partner, concerned about maintaining the integrity of what we mean by each specific term and principle.

We've also codeveloped “culture of inclusion” trainings with L&D. They had the subject-matter expertise to pinpoint the highly engaging points in the instructor-led, in-person training and re-create those experiences in a different e-learning format.

**How do you see the perception of DEI changing?**

SCHMIEDL: Responsibility maps to the C-suite, typically, so in order for cultural initiatives — values, diversity, inclusion, belonging, etc. — to be effective, they have to sit at a C-suite level. My hope is that we see more CEOs recognizing the impact of these topics and making them C-level concerns. Without strong executive support, professionals in DEI have to do a lot more influencing up.

“People are making the connection that diversity, equity, and inclusion are not a set of initiatives that operate in a silo.”
Many DEI practitioners will tell you that they are doing culture work, but they don’t necessarily get that mandate or have “culture” as part of their title. You see it more now, whether the chief people officer is also the chief inclusion officer, or in roles like mine. We came up with the “culture and inclusion” title when I took over the culture and values team. It truly depends on who’s leading HR and how much they buy into this idea of DEI being woven into the fabric of everything.

What kind of mistakes have you seen in DEI across industries, and what have you seen work well?

SCHMIEDL: The common thread in the mistakes that I've seen is defensiveness and assuming that there is one “right” way. To get up and want to do this work every day, you first need humor, but also humility.

Part of approaching learning with humility is sharing where your own personal learning has happened. I encourage that of leaders all the time—and I do it myself. I reference the fact that I’m in an interracial marriage, and that after 17 years, my husband and I are having some conversations that 10 years ago we weren’t able to have effectively.

At Wayfair, we started a series called Change Starts at Home, which featured folks sharing their own stories — about the work environment, interpersonal interactions, or experiences in broader society. We provided speakers a space to share their stories, unfiltered and also unquestioned. What’s critical is to create an environment that is psychologically safe. To do that, you allow people to listen, but you also let them know when you’re expecting some level of participation and what the modes of participation can look like. We created a format where people understood that you don’t question someone’s experience — instead you question what we can do to ensure that that negative experience doesn’t happen again.

How do leaders foster a culture that embraces people’s curiosity and acceptance that meets them where they are in the learning process?

SCHMIEDL: People sometimes get mired in the disagreements around what they’re seeing. It can help to ask big picture questions to move forward: “Do we want to do something about this, and if so, what could we start to do?” Right there, people opt in: “I’ve got energy around this. I have some thoughts. I want to engage.” Even if there are some people who want to sit back and figure out what the lessons are to be learned, you’re able to engage those who are ready to go right now and leverage some of the productivity that comes out of those moments.

How have you had to adapt employee-facing programs during the pandemic? And what changes might you keep in place once people return to offices?

SCHMIEDL: We still have people in the field and our warehouses who are physically at work every day. But for our corporate employees, who’ve been working from home for about a year now, we realized the benefit of being in a personalized space in community. Helping to create that psychological safety makes people feel more comfortable engaging.

As a company, we’ve grown so quickly that we never had an onsite space in which we could fit all of our people, let alone the almost 4,000 people who tuned in to our first Change Starts at Home session. We quickly understood how this virtual environment allows us to include more people, no matter what time zones they’re in.

The virtual setting made us more thoughtful and deliberate around communication. Even though we were all in an office together previously, teams were siloed. Being able to bring different groups together and visually see everybody on the screen really shifts your thinking. With the benefit of proximity, it’s easy to overlook making some information explicit.

There are people I probably never would have seen or interacted with if we hadn’t pivoted to a virtual environment. In the same way that we thought that connection would be lost, we’re actually realizing how we can provide deeper and wider connections in this virtual environment — that we can do more with in culture and inclusion.

KeyAnna Schmiedl is global head of culture and inclusion at Wayfair (@wayfairatwork). Deborah Milstein is associate editor at MIT Sloan Management Review.
Learning and Development Trends Today – and Beyond the Pandemic

In this Q&A, Rashim Mogha, customer market leader for leadership and business solutions at Skillsoft, provides an update on professional learning and development (L&D). She shares insights on L&D opportunities and trends, describes the educational needs of today’s millennial employees and business leaders, and discusses COVID-19’s current and future impact on workplace learning.

This conversation has been edited for clarity, length, and editorial style.

Q: According to a recent Gallup poll, only 4 out of 10 employees strongly agree that they have opportunities to learn and grow at work. What’s the reason behind the real—or perceived—lack of access to work-based learning?

Mogha: I believe it’s less a matter of too few learning opportunities and more about people having too little time in their schedules to utilize opportunities. I’m based in Silicon Valley, where there’s a huge startup culture; people work 16 to 18 hours a day. They can’t carve out time in their schedules to dedicate to learning. So for them, most learning is on the job.

L&D organizations need to start thinking about how to integrate learning into people’s day-to-day jobs and how to make it valuable so that not just individuals, but leadership teams as well, can carve out time for everybody to learn.

Q: Millennials—generally defined as people who are now about 25 to 40 years old—consistently rank L&D opportunities as a top career priority. What should employers do to meet this population’s needs?

Mogha: Gen X [now about 40 to 55 years old] was all about, “I’m dedicated to my work; I want to do what I have degrees in, and I’m going to give 200% to it.” Millennials are all about, “How do I integrate work into my life?” They see it as a holistic goal.
They're also very resourceful. They've always had technology at their fingertips. They grew up learning to use the internet and looking for content. So they are curators, not necessarily creators. For example, when I learned coding, I understood the basics of coding. Millennials do that today too, but they don't always code from scratch. They leverage places like GitHub and other resources to get base content, then work on it to make it better.

So, how do you approach this generation? With quick, experiential learning. Millennials like to access just-in-time information: “Today I'm stuck at home. What micro-learning can I take? What short video can I watch to move on to the next piece or the next level in my work?” Look for ways to help people build 10 or 15 minutes into their daily work lives to integrate learning.

Millennials specifically do not want to be in cookie-cutter mode. So another option is to ask them, “How much time do you have to invest in yourself today — 15 minutes, 20 minutes, 45 minutes?” Giving them that flexibility to invest in themselves, depending on what their schedule looks like, changes the game. It gives them back the power to drive their learning.

In addition, millennials are used to working with multimodalities. Think about providing opportunities for consumption in different media forms: audiobooks, micro-learning videos, podcasts, PDFs on Kindle, books.

Finally, it’s important to build a continuous-learning culture. Millennials like learning every day. They're innovative — and they're not afraid to change jobs. They want to find the right companies that work for them and are invested in them. They're also very resourceful. They've always had technology at their fingertips. They grew up learning to use the internet and looking for content. So they are curators, not necessarily creators. For example, when I learned coding, I understood the basics of coding. Millennials do that today too, but they don't always code from scratch. They leverage places like GitHub and other resources to get base content, then work on it to make it better.

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Finally, it’s important to build a continuous-learning culture. Millennials like learning every day. They're innovative — and they're not afraid to change jobs. They want to find the right companies that work for them and are invested in them. So companies have to up their game to provide the right culture and growth opportunities to help this generation become a productive and engaged workforce.

**Q:** It seems as if today’s leaders need to engage in continuous learning themselves, in addition to providing it for their employees. Could you speak to that?

**Mogha:** When we ask customers about their biggest challenges related to digital transformation, they say, “Leaders making decisions on yesterday’s information.” So I think that more organizations now recognize the critical nature of developing leaders. They’re paying attention to it not just as a “nice to have” but as a true business sustainability model.

That means leaders need to recognize the importance of developing themselves. Invest in yourself so that you’re able to better manage people who might be younger joining your team with different types of expertise. Listen to them, learn from them, establish the proper vocabulary and collaboration skills, and still manage the dynamics of a team to get things done.

Management’s relationship with L&D has also changed significantly. Five or 10 years ago, L&D teams would decide what programs were needed, and the company would roll them out. Today, business leaders play an equal role in those decisions. For instance, as a business leader, I’ve requested courses on encouraging diverse thinking in innovation programs and on changing long-standing team mindsets. Business leaders are now partners with L&D teams in a big way, helping them determine what the business’s learning needs are.

**Q:** Where are Skillsoft customers focusing their efforts in terms of reskilling or upskilling employees?

**Mogha:** We are in the middle of a fourth Industrial Revolution. None of us will be doing the same work we’re doing today five years from now, maybe not even two years from now. We are already seeing technologies like automation having an impact on the job roles. People who used to work with spreadsheets and create tabular reports have, or will soon have, tools at their fingertips to automatically do the work they used to do. They might take on new roles as data analysts. They’ll have to consume and look at the data differently and build patterns out of it. How do they reskill or upskill themselves for the jobs to bring in the creative side? They do that by upskilling and reskilling themselves.

With so many businesses moving from traditional “on-prem” models to software-as-a-service subscriptions, we’ve seen high demand for courses on the business aspects of cloud computing. But the people who take these courses aren’t necessarily technologists. They’re business people, finance people, and HR people who want to understand what moving to cloud means from a business perspective.
We’ve also seen an increase in demand for productivity and tools learning, such as the Agile methodology and DevOps, and even Excel and Office 365. And then there’s demand for improving skills in areas such as establishing effective virtual teams, communicating with confidence, maximizing your time, and being a great listener. That all speaks to a strong need to have an organizational platform that can supply the full spectrum of learning options covering the whole enterprise.

“The pandemic has affected the way we live. We communicate differently now. We learn differently. We do business differently. We’ve moved to a virtual world. That means individuals and leaders must think about problems differently as well.”

Q: Could you share examples of organizations that are doing things right in terms of providing L&D opportunities?

Mogha: A global financial institution and a leading scientific-engineering organization both come to mind. One thing they’re both doing well is recognizing that having a mindset to reskill internally — to take the expertise that you have, but make it better — happens at that intersection of technical skills and business skills. Both recognized that their business models are changing and therefore the work people do that has value is changing.

So how do they help people become more digitally intelligent? By building a path to digital competence. It starts with thinking about what skill sets and mindsets they need to be more digital and giving everyone the vision they need to go in the same direction. They have done a good job of identifying who and how, and of using our digital transformation content, even for leaders — because again, these people are leading teams with new technology and creating their paths to digital dexterity.

Q: How has COVID-19 affected workplace learning, and what will L&D look like when the pandemic has passed?

Mogha: The pandemic has affected the way we live. We communicate differently now. We learn differently. We do business differently. We’ve moved to a virtual world.

That means individuals and leaders must think about problems differently as well. They have to be innovative. They have to preemptively design solutions that the customers haven’t even started articulating as problems. They have to look at how to be agile and nimble. They have to practice empathy in their conversations, not just with employees, but with customers and vendors. They have to build an agile, empathetic, customer-centric, innovative culture that values diversity so that the solutions they create work for everybody. And they have to weave it in the DNA of the company.

That’s why there’s more responsibility now than ever on L&D teams to bring in solutions that help leaders achieve this. Skillsoft pivoted in a big way in 2020 — for example, by building our courses around how to work in shared spaces. We’ve added diversity, equity, and inclusion courses because the underlying causes of the social unrest we saw last year are something we don’t want to see continue.

From a technology perspective, we added a lot more content to our library as well. We introduced Leadercamps, where we basically pick a topical leadership challenge, bring in an expert, and deliver that value to our customers. We’ve seen that people have really invested in spending time in learning during the pandemic because they realize that what’s been thrown at them isn’t an anomaly. It’s going to be our new normal moving forward.

Again, that’s why continuous learning is so important. The good thing is that we all recognize that; leaders recognize that. The next piece is to create those pathways to continuous learning. With every little step, people are future-proofing themselves, making sure that they are prepared for the new model.

ABOUT SKILLSOFT

Skillsoft delivers online learning, training, and talent solutions to help organizations unleash their edge. Leveraging immersive, engaging content, Skillsoft enables organizations to unlock the potential in their best assets — their people — and build teams with the skills they need for success. Empowering 45 million learners and counting, Skillsoft democratizes learning through an intelligent learning experience and a customized, learner-centric approach to skills development with resources in the Leadership Development, Business Skills, Technology & Developer, Digital Transformation, and Compliance categories. Learn more at www.skillsoft.com.
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