cornerstone

How to close your organization's skills gap

Closing skill gaps takes more than training.

In 2019, an increasing number of organizations are focused on how learning can help them weather the skills gap. Research by Deloitte found that twice as many executives in 2019 are ready and willing to *"train their existing employees* rather than hire new ones."[1] This shift is just in time: 40% of US employers can't find candidates with the necessary skills[2] and 78% expect to experience a skills gap in the future.[3]

Yet prioritizing development is just the first step in successfully navigating the future of work. Being "willing to train" employees isn't the same as infusing learning throughout the entire organization—in short, becoming a learning organization.

Learning organizations will have a competitive edge in the coming skills shortage for several reasons.

First, they see the root of the skills gap as not a lack of qualified candidates but a large pool of untapped talent, talent that simply hasn't had the right kind of development opportunities. Second, by prioritizing learning throughout the organization (and the entire employee lifecycle), learning organizations can more effectively respond to and innovate in the face of technological, political, and economic disruption.

Third, and perhaps most critically, learning organizations don't expect "training" to solve the skills gap challenge. Instead they view training for what it is: one slice of learning, not the whole pie. Every activity, every role, is a learning opportunity.

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From a practical standpoint, this means that learning organizations:

Align development strategies with the realities of the skills economy. To succeed in the skills economy, organizations need to shift from promoting "continuous learning" to enabling "connected learning." Research by Gartner determined that while continuous learning drives engagement, it doesn't necessarily drive skill development (and may even hamper it).[4]

Connected learning happens when employees can pursue learning that is of interest personally but still applicable professionally. Organizations can begin by first anticipating potential skill shortages—using predictive data and analysis tools—and then providing learning opportunities that serve both career aspirations and the organization's future needs.

Enable learning in the flow of work. A key component in driving connected learning is making learning contextual, i.e., relevant to and within the flow of work. Despite the fact that learning at work makes employees happier, more confident, and less stressed,[5] on average, employees still have very little time to devote to learning new skills. The solution? Technology that automatically delivers learning opportunities throughout the day, within other projects, e.g., as employees are working on presentations, projects, and emails. Per Josh Bersin, enabling learning in the flow of work means providing opportunities both *within learning management systems and within systems of productivity,* where employees spend the majority of their time.[6]

Rapidly deploy new training. A skill's half-life in the 21st century is barely two years. Changing technology—and changing markets—mean organizations must be able to upskill workers quickly. Forward-thinking organizations are tackling this challenge in two ways. First, they're being highly proactive and upskilling current employees on a regular basis, i.e., making skill development an integral part of everyday learning. Second, organizations are ensuring new training can be deployed quickly by replacing often outdated in-house content and time-consuming in-person trainings with cloud-based, scalable learning management platforms and ready-made, expert-designed content.

Giving every employee an opportunity to develop a career, not just a "job." Most organizations help high potential employees develop their careers for obvious reasons: engagement, retention, and succession. But learning organizations also use career development to close the skills gap. These organizations offer career development opportunities to every employee, not just those on track for leadership roles, to give meaning and long-term purpose to upskilling and to build a strong internal talent pipeline at every level.

1 https://hbr.org/sponsored/2019/03/how-leaders-are-navigating-the-fourth-industrial-revolution
2 https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/closing-the-skills-gap-creating-workforce-development-programs-that-work-for-everyone
3 https://www.td.org/press-release/83-percent-of-organizations-have-skills-gaps-according-to-atd-research
4 https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/motivate-employees-to-reskill-for-the-digital-age/
5   https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/want-happy-work-spend-time-learning-josh-bersin/
6 https://joshbersin.com/2018/11/learning-in-the-flow-of-work-arriving-now/

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