USING LEARNING TO ENGAGE, COMPETE, AND SUCCEED

Kelly Palmer and David Blake

The world of work is going through a large-scale transition—much like the transition we went through from the agricultural economy to the Industrial Revolution.

We are now in the age of digitization, automation, and acceleration—an age in which critical skills and expertise will be an imperative for us to succeed in the economy.

Because historically we've only experiences these kinds of workforce transitions over decades, if not centuries, we are in uncharted territory, especially in terms of how quickly things are changing: "There are few precedents in which societies have successfully retrained such large numbers of workers."

The Workforce Is Not Prepared

The quote above comes from a 2018 McKinsey Global Institute report, which makes abundantly clear that the workforce is not prepared for the disruption that's upon us: "Sixty-two percent of executives believe they will need to retrain or replace more than a quarter of their workforce between now and 2023 due to advancing automation and digitization." Research also shows that both companies and graduating students are feeling the pain: 82 percent of employers say it's

difficult to fill positions, while 83 percent of students have no job lined up after graduation, and 62 percent of students report that the job search is "frustrating" or "very frustrating." Even more troubling, leaders sometimes find after hiring new grads that they are wholly unprepared to succeed at their jobs or to navigate the real world of work. Universities are not preparing graduates for the real world of work, and companies perpetuate the skills gap by following outdated hiring methods that focus on pedigree—GPA, degrees, etc.—rather than hiring for the skills that will help them and their employees succeed as the future of work changes.

If you aren't ready and willing to learn every day and keep up with a rapidly changing world, you can't and won't stay competitive. Gone are the days when you could graduate with a four-year degree and feel secure that you had learned everything you needed to know to stay relevant for your entire career.

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The Expert Revolution

Old methods of corporate learning are not going to be effective strategies for building skills for the future. People developing new skills and building expertise are often self-directed. This means employees are learning everywhere all the time, but companies are not recognizing what people are learning, what skills they are building, and how they are working to prepare for their future careers. People are doing this for survival. They want to stay relevant in the workforce.

People are often experts at all kinds of things that don't relate to their day job—but organizations aren't tapping into them. We are not just talking about the data scientist, blockchain guru, or AI engineer. We are talking about the woman in the engineering department who is an expert at drafting complex project plans and keeping people working on those projects on schedule. Or the administrative assistant who is an expert at getting urgent purchase orders through the system quickly. Or the highly regarded software engineer who is a JavaScript expert, frequently sought out by other engineers for her advice. Or the sales guy who knows how to tell the most compelling product story and give a killer demo. Or the person who knows PowerPoint inside out, and is the first person everyone goes to when they get stuck creating a presentation.

These experts are some of the 80 percent of employees who are not targeted for management or leadership development, who have had to figure out on their own how to develop their exper-tise and build their skills and knowledge. Driven by passion or curiosity about a specific skill or special interest, they identified what they didn't know and what was new out there. They closed their own skills gap by consuming learning in whatever form they could get their hands on—video, blog, online course, in-person course, book—and applying what they learned on the job until they mastered it. They may have been fortunate enough to have a mentor or a boss who guided their learning journey, but frequently that's not the case.

No doubt, these self-driven experts who can learn quickly are crucial to a company's success, and organizations need to nurture their ability to build new skills continuously. But to stay genuinely competitive—to grow your talent base—you need to focus on developing new experts, on helping everyone on your team close their personal skills gaps and master specialized capabilities. And the way to do that is by encouraging them to "own" their professional development every day. Rather than dictating from above which skills every employee should learn and how they should learn them, the most effective leaders inspire employees to personalize what and how they learn. Humans are wonderfully complex, uniquely autonomous, and ultimately unpredictable. We should celebrate and respect that. And yet, we often try to make everyone the same. Learning is complicated and messy. It's not enough to offer support to your employees on their learning journey; you also have to create the right environment for employees to take ownership of what and how they learn.

Learning and Mindset as a Competitive Advantage

Companies that understand the power of the growth mindset have a true advantage, not only because they help their employees realize that they should be learning throughout their entire careers, but also because leaders who embrace the growth mindset tend to be more introspective about their own learning and leadership. Satya Nadella took over as CEO of Microsoft in 2014 and was inspired by the concepts of Carol Dweck, whose seminal book *Mindset* introduced the distinction between a growth and fixed mindset. Nadella understands that a learning culture can be a huge competitive advantage: "Culture is something that needs to adapt and change," he once said in an interview, "and you've got to be able to have a learning culture." Nadella embraced Dweck's concepts in *Mindset* and reiterated one of the most important concepts to his

employees: "If you take two people, one of them is a learn-it-all and the other one is a know-it-all, the learn-it-all will always trump the know-it-all in the long run, even if they start with less innate capability." Asking for feedback is not that common for CEOs, and can be uncomfortable for leaders who sometimes feel that they need to lead as a "know-it-all." But Nadella embraces feedback and the growth mindset.

Another interesting point Nadella makes is that the employees who are the smartest now may not be the smartest in the long term, depending on their mindset, something that companies should take into account during the hiring process. During the interview process you can identify which people are lifelong learners with the growth mindset. For example, when you ask lifelong learners what they learned the previous year, they tend to respond straight away. When interviewees struggle to answer the question, it reveals that they are not intentionally lifelong learners. People who value learning and can demonstrate learning agility in the workplace are valuable now and will continue to be in demand in the future. And yet, a growth mindset is not the only attribute employees need in today's workforce. As recent research shows, a steady dose of grit goes a long way to optimizing the learning process.

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How Organizations Can Help Lead the Way

Those who embrace the urgency of reskilling and upskilling their workforce of tomorrow today, will succeed in differentiating themselves and their employees to remain relevant as the future of work changes. There are seven guiding principles organizations can follow to help employees build the skills that are so critical to their success of now and in the future.

Make learning a competitive advantage: Companies that build a culture where learning is part of the overall strategy—and something that people love and want to do—will have a clear advantage.

Embrace personalized learning: Technology enables personalized learning, a key factor in helping people integrate learning with their own work.

Combat content overload: Curate the abundance of learning resources available to help employees learn what they need, when they need it.

Understand the power of peers: Implement strategies to learn from each other and tap into the knowledge and experience of those around you.

Succeed with the right technology: Determine which new innovative approaches to learning are right, and create learning ecosystems to help employees succeed.

Analyze your employees' skills with data and insights: Use data to get a better understanding of what skills people have, what they need, how to close the gap and find the next internal opportunity.

Make skills and expertise count: Use the Skills Quotient, or SQ, to measure and understand what skills your employees have and what skills they need and apply it to recruiting, mentoring, and promotions.

It's hard to predict where the world will go next. Because of that, we have to think less about the traditional view of careers as job roles and job descriptions and more about the skills people will need to solve the world's most pressing problems. This is why learning and continuously building skills are so important. It's why employees need to be agile learners to keep up with, and be prepared for, what's new and how technology is advancing in the world. Skills are currency in the expertise economy, and the most successful companies are already thinking about this and putting strategies in place—these will be the companies that will thrive in an uncertain future.

Reskill and Upskill 25% of your Workforce

What can you do today to really help your employees succeed in their careers and help your company adapt to the constant changes? First, every CEO and business leader needs to realize that they are going to have to reskill, cross-skill, and upskill up to 25% of their workforce in the next five years. With this in mind, you can start to get your workforce ready by creating a skills strategy as part of your business strategy. Identify the top three skills most critical to your company across all functions. For example, say you are a consulting company and more and more of your clients are demanding services in data analytics, but you don't have enough employees with these skills. You could identify data analytics, data mining/machine learning, and data visualization as the top three skills you need to have your employees build.

Take a Skills Inventory

Next, take an inventory of how many people in your company already have these skills and how many people will need to have these skills in the next three to five years. Then get your employees to go with you on this journey of transformation, excited that you want to take them along with you, exited that you want to help them acquire new skills and develop personally. Emphasize how investing in their skills is not only helping the company, but also helping employees succeed for their future careers as well.

Then identify the top three skills in each of the organizations in your company. For example, in Marketing, the top three skills may be social media marketing, storytelling, and analytics. In engineering it may be python, SQL, and empathy. The reason to do this is not to dictate what skills every employee needs in a command and control fashion, but rather to help guide employees to think about what skills are going to be most in demand in the company, and in the careers. You want there to be synergy between what the company needs and what the employees want for their careers. That's the sweet spot.

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Personalize Skill Plans

After identifying these top skills in your company and in your organizations, let your employees create personalized skill plans. To do this, first employees need to ask themselves what they want to do with their careers. Are they trying to get better at the job they already have? Are they trying to move into a different field or move to a different project that requires new skills? Do they want to move into management, and if so, do they have the skills required to be successful? How often are these questions asked in your company? More often, companies decide that employees should just build skills the company needs, not what the employees may want. If employees already have the most needed skills, they will choose other skills to build to keep their careers moving forward. If your employees are building skills for the future, it will be good for the company's future, too.

The Skills Quotient

Creating a skills strategy, taking a skills inventory, and getting the workforce ready for the future is imperative. Yet, we lack a common language to talk about skills. The Skills Quotient or SQ can be used to measure continuous learning and skills development. If you look at the Net Promoter Score or NPS as an analog, it reveals the power of creating a common framework. Net Promoter Score is a simple framework that enables companies to measure and benchmark their customers' experiences in a standardized way. Prior to NPS, companies were all measuring customer satisfaction in a jumble of qualitative and quantitative measures. There was no consistency, and no framework. That meant companies couldn't compare or benchmark. By introducing a common framework, the practitioners of client satisfaction all of a sudden had a universal way to measure and answer for their work. It spanned products and product categories.

It was common between companies and across industry verticals. They could benchmark across time and between companies. It elevated their craft to the C-Suite, where they were able to bring codified answers and track progress with accountability. Today, every CEO knows what the NPS is for their company.

But there isn't a CEO in the world today who can answer in a codified way for the skills of their organization or what skills they need. Just as NPS changed that for customer satisfaction, we have long needed that solution for skills. That is what Skills Quotient (SQ) does. It introduces a common framework that every company can use to measure the skills required against the skills needed, for individuals, teams, and even the entire company. It elevates the practice of talent and skills measurement, from the middle of the organization to the C-Suite, giving every CEO a way to answer for the skills of their organization and a way to track progress with accountability. The SQ reflects the skill level and skill gap any person, team, or organization has. It is a straightforward and non-proprietary approach to giving everyone a common framework with which to approach skills and will do for talent, HR & L&D what the NPS did for customer satisfaction.

Today, there are more tools, content, and technologies than ever before to help your employees become the experts you need. Above all, success requires that you adopt a new mindset when it comes to skilling your talent. It demands that you start thinking of your employees as complex, unique individuals who should be in control of their own learning and careers. **Finally, it dares you to let go of outdated and traditional ways of closing the skills gap in your workplace and to embrace the new challenges ahead in the expertise economy.** ⏻

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