

Build a learning culture for the future of work





When forward-thinking organizations look at modern HR challenges — a growing skills gap, a talent shortage and rapidly changing technology — organizations see these challenges as an opportunity to transform.

Why are these organizations so optimistic about the future of work? They understand and embrace the reality behind the challenges:

- While experts predict that 52 percent of existing human tasks will be performed by robots by 2025,¹ technology will create 133 million new jobs by 2022.²
- Organizations are looking to upskill and reskill the workforce faster than ever before, and yet today’s employees are wholly on board with intensive, continuous education. Employees across generations, not just millennials, are eager to learn and ready to play a lead role in their own development.
- Traditional career paths are disappearing, but they’re being replaced by dynamic experiences, paths that can generate more engagement, enthusiasm and motivation from employees.

Still, it’s one thing to recognize opportunity and quite another to fully leverage it. Vanguard organizations are becoming learning organizations, where “learning is work and work is learning.”³ In contrast, static organizations continue to “repeat old practices,” implementing change that remains merely “cosmetic and ... short-lived.”⁴

While this kind of high-impact environment can’t be achieved overnight, organizations can begin to build by focusing on these six areas:

1. Establish a learning culture

From the *Harvard Business Review* to *Forbes*, McKinsey to Mercer, experts encourage organizations to “build a learning culture.” This learning culture provides a foundation to address everything from the skills gap to the talent shortage, from disengaged employees to the need for a more agile workforce that can meet the demands of a rapidly changing economy. But what does a learning culture look like in the day-to-day work world? An effective learning culture within an organization:

- **Prioritizes learning.** An organization with a robust learning culture prioritizes learning across all roles and departments and has established development as a pathway to and foundational element in the organization’s future agility, flexibility and success.

An organization with a learning culture provides learning opportunities to all employees — regardless of level or role.

- **Integrates learning throughout the organization.** In a learning culture, development doesn't take place solely during off-hours or within microlearning sessions, but instead is integrated into the fabric of the organization. That means learning and development is no longer a phase in the employee life cycle but instead is a constant companion during an employee's career. It's part of hiring, with organizations sourcing candidates not just for existing skills but also for learning aptitude, and it functions in a feedback loop with performance management. Learning transforms onboarding; instead of merely filling out paperwork, new hires build new skills and increase productivity. And because employees are learning even before day 1 on the job, organizations with a learning culture find it easier to build capable leaders and can navigate succession planning more successfully.
- **Provides multiple learning pathways.** An organization with a learning culture provides learning opportunities to all employees — regardless of level or role — using a variety of tools and technologies, each adapted to the individual's needs. Content isn't just curated, it's contextualized — and thus made more relevant and meaningful. The right learning opportunity goes to the right person at the right time when content is, per Josh Bersin, "organized and arranged by role, job title and competency"⁵ within a learning platform.

2. Nurture curiosity by offering learning opportunities to everyone

Much has been made of millennials' appetite for learning. But curiosity and a desire to learn are human traits that transcend artificial generational boundaries. It's up to organizations to provide the kind of learning opportunities and ways of working that nurture this innate curiosity instead of nullifying it. It's worth it: According to research by Deloitte, organizations that prioritize continuous learning are 46 percent more likely to be first to market, 92 percent more likely to innovate and have 37 percent greater employee productivity.⁶

Curiosity isn't innate to those in certain roles, either. Too often, organizations create development opportunities for some jobs and not others. Just as age doesn't dictate an employee's appetite for learning, neither does role. Many organizations focus on training entry-level employees and developing the leadership capabilities of high-level employees, leaving midlevel employees without equal opportunities for learning. In the new world of work, leaders can (and should) be developed from anywhere in the organization.

3. Enable employees to drive their own learning

According to research by Mercer, 83 percent of surveyed employees take responsibility for keeping skills current.⁷ Organizations can capitalize on this desire by providing a full range of learning opportunities using a variety of technologies and methods. This includes microlearning, in-person classes and game-based lessons to reach different types of learners.



4. Develop employees' learning agility

The half-life of professional skills is now 5 years,⁸ and according to research by the World Economic Forum, one in four workers reported a “skills mismatch” between the skills they have and the skills they need in their current job.⁹ How then can organizations keep up with the rapid obsolescence of skills? By realizing it’s not so much about keeping up as it is about developing fluidity and agility around skill development and learning. Employees today need an overarching aptitude of how to learn.

HR professionals know this: Research by Mercer identified “learning agility” as the third most important thing hiring managers want to know about a candidate.¹⁰ But learning agility, like curiosity, can also be developed. “How to Cultivate Learning Agility,” a white paper published by Harvard Business Publishing, shows how organizations like Deloitte and Fiat Chrysler Automobile don’t just hire for learning agility — they nurture it. Both organizations offer formalized training programs designed to build adaptability, receptivity to continuous learning and motivation.¹¹

5. Create career paths that are not so much traditional as transformational

According to Deloitte, the career paths of tomorrow will look nothing like those of the past. Instead of an upward, prescribed trajectory, 21st-century careers will be a “a series of developmental experiences, each offering a person the opportunity to acquire new skills, perspectives and judgement.”¹²

Employees are on board with this approach, and yet organizations aren’t keeping up. Many development programs are still mired in the past, originally created to nurture traditional, hierarchical roles. Organizations are also falling behind in empowering employees to drive their own careers. Research by Deloitte found almost 60 percent of respondents thought their organizations were “somewhat effective or not effective in empowering people to manage their own careers.”¹³

6. Offer empowerment, not entanglement

It's one thing to offer employees continuous learning and more self-directed career paths. It's quite another to enable employees to port these opportunities to another organization. And yet giving employees total control around what they learn while enabling them to take the results of this learning to a new job is the way of the future. Certainly, it's uncomfortable. And it seems to contradict decades of HR policy and strategy. After all, why invest in an employee who might leave?

But this isn't the 20th-century work environment. By offering learning portability, organizations create an environment of trust and employee empowerment. And as more organizations do the same, employees will be free to find the right work "home" and thus be more productive and engaged.

American Express already encourages employees to list earned certifications on social media sites like LinkedIn, despite this increasing the risk that employees will find new jobs outside the company. According to Samantha Hammock, chief learning officer at American Express (as quoted in *Harvard Business Review*), "We've spent a lot of time debating [the cost of developing talent when people may leave the firm], particularly in the past year, when we made a large investment in our flagship leadership program. Ultimately, we decided that we want to grow great leaders, and we want American Express to be known for that."¹⁴

A win-win for organizations and employees

The future of work will bring tremendous opportunity for organizations and employees alike. By leveraging technology for repetitive activities, organizations can engage employees with more meaningful, problem-solving roles. This, in turn, will enable organizations to be more creative, flexible and agile, which are meaningful competitive edges in a volatile economy.

However, the ability to take advantage of these opportunities depends on a readiness to evolve, change and, perhaps most critically, learn. The old world of work — hierarchical roles, limited development — benefitted only some of the workforce. The new world of work — flexible career paths, continuous learning — has the potential to harness every employee's unique talents and nurture more innovation and engagement than ever before.

Source:

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- ³ Josh Haims and Dani Johnson. *Work is learning and learning is work: Becoming a high-impact learning organization*. Deloitte. August 8, 2017. <https://capitalhblog.deloitte.com/2017/08/08/work-is-learning-and-learning-is-work-becoming-a-high-impact-learning-organization/>
- ⁴ David A. Garvin. *Building a Learning Organization*. Harvard Business Review. July-August 1993. <https://hbr.org/1993/07/building-a-learning-organization>
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- ¹¹ Harvard Business Publishing. *How to cultivate learning agility*. 2016. <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/insight/how-to-cultivate-learning-agility/>
- ¹² Deloitte. *The rise of the social enterprise: 2018 Deloitte global human capital trends*. Page 41. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/HCTrends2018/2018-HCTrends_Rise-of-the-social-enterprise.pdf
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- ¹⁴ Harvard Business Review. *We're giving ownership of development to individuals: A roundtable with chief learning officers*. March – April 2019. Page 55. <https://hbr.org/2019/03/educating-the-next-generation-of-leaders>

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