

# The workforce of the future begins and ends with people





People are still the core of business success. Even with increased use of automation, businesses will need a new kind of workforce, one made up of employees who are agile, flexible and always learning. The automated future will be one where humans augment smart technologies, and key human skills — critical thinking, more complex decision-making and problem solving — are in short supply.

Forward-thinking companies are asking: How can we prepare employees to thrive in the age of automation? What will the digital workplace of the future look like and how will it function? And, most critically, what can we do now to ensure we have the workforce we need tomorrow?

Often the answer to the above questions is “reskilling.” Research by the World Economic Forum (WEF) has shown that reskilling employees yields a more positive cost-benefit balance than firing and hiring. As 1.37 million workers are displaced in the next 10 years, primarily due to technology, the WEF found that reskilling is in “the financial interest of a company” for at least 25 percent of “at-risk” employees.<sup>i</sup>

Reskilling, however, is just one facet of a larger solution. Creating the workforce of tomorrow, and preparing employees for a time of great change, hinges on making continuous learning central to every organization. Learning in this fashion, both inside the workplace and out, is key to thriving in the Fourth Industrial Revolution and beyond, for organizations and employees alike. Amazon may be spending \$700 million to retrain one-third of its workforce, but this reskilling is part of a larger initiative, that of using learning to not just prepare but also engage, retain and inspire the workforce.

Ari Ginsberg, professor of entrepreneurship and management at New York University’s Stern School of Business, as quoted in Knowledge@Wharton, says that Amazon’s reskilling “will facilitate greater retention and make recruitment easier as the need for such talent will only grow.”<sup>ii</sup>

How then can organizations begin making continuous learning central to the business strategy — and thus facilitate the creation of a more capable, agile workforce? HR experts recommend the following four calls to action:

- Explore today’s complex demographic landscape
- Analyze how innovative organizations are building a culture that democratizes talent
- Understand and enable “learning while working”
- Apply programs, solutions and technologies that optimize collaborative learning

## Explore today's complex demographic landscape

Despite reaching retirement age, Baby Boomers are not only staying in the workforce but often returning to work after brief retirements. This trend is likely to continue for several reasons: People are living longer, healthier lives; few are financially prepared for retirement; healthcare costs are rising; and some Boomers and Generation Xers find themselves caring for elderly parents and young adult children at the same time. And while Millennials may make up the bulk of the workforce today, Generation Z, the generation that has never known a time without digital technology, is not far behind.

HR practitioners must now determine how to leverage people, process and technology around four generations of employees, a workforce that has varying levels of experience, specialization, tenure and learning preferences.



But generational variations are only one of the challenges facing HR and L&D leaders. The rapid increase in globalization also affects employee learning and development. Workforces in different countries may need instruction that is sensitive to varied cultural and language preferences, while remote employees in general need access to mobile learning and development tools. Similarly, the rise of part-time and gig employees requires organizations to think beyond traditional, synchronous and on-location training.

### Actions to consider

- **Develop learning curriculum and implement tools that can be used by everyone inside and outside of the organization.** Making learning opportunities available to in-house, remote, global, multi-generational and gig workers can seem like a complex endeavor. Yet today's L&D platforms, along with extensive content libraries, make it easier than ever before to reach everyone in an organization with targeted curriculum and tailored sharing of knowledge and meaningful insights, on their devices of choice.
- **Give non-traditional employees the same access to learning and knowledge-sharing opportunities.** Unlike in the past, today's part-time and gig employees often expect full-time perks, such as the opportunity to engage in learning, build knowledge and further their careers, says Laci Loew, executive vice president of marketing and business development at collaboration software provider Pandexio. "Giving these workers access to learning opportunities not only creates more skilled and engaged individuals but also builds more productive, cohesive, collaborative groups."

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## Analyze how innovative organizations are building a culture that democratizes talent

A decade ago, the rigid corporate hierarchy was the norm. The authors of the global research study “Workforce 2020: Building today’s talent to meet tomorrow’s needs” refer to these structures as “command and control” structures, where leadership not only made decisions but also controlled the flow of information.<sup>iii</sup>

Today, an organization’s ability to pivot in the marketplace, innovate and transform to meet new demands depends on agility — and agility requires a workforce that is networked and collaborative. Organizations are aware of the need to shift: In a 2018 study conducted by HR.com and Pandexio, 77 percent saw a “shift to networked structures” as either very important (31%) or important (46%).<sup>iv</sup> A mere 6 percent responded that a networked structure would not be important in the year 2020.

According to Pandexio Executive Chairman Bob Danna, organizational structures in forward-thinking companies are moving from hierarchical systems to team-based systems. “Teams tend not to be static over time. They form, they dissolve, they morph based on business needs. Teams, more so than traditional corporate hierarchies of the past, enable businesses to respond to the changing economic environment, to the competitive landscape, whatever is needed at the time.”

Beyond enabling agility and responsiveness, teams accelerate organizational efforts to harness the expertise and wisdom of all employees, at all levels. “In a team-based structure, someone may be from Generation Z and have only 1 year of experience, but they may also have the right expertise to contribute to a team’s success or even lead a team,” Danna says. “And that’s the big ‘aha!’ moment, realizing that anyone can step up to contribute or lead.”

### Action to consider

- **Don’t dismiss employees’ perspectives or ideas based on age, tenure or role.** At its core, a team-based structure assumes that every employee has something to contribute, a perspective that benefits both organizations and workforces. “We always talk about the importance of the customer voice. What’s equally important is the employee voice,” Loew says. “Democratizing talent means giving all employees an opportunity to contribute, regardless of tenure, assuming they have evidence-based knowledge and insights to share. When we do that, we not only help the organization build workforce capability but also prompt a more innovative and agile culture. In short, we create an employee experience that is so compelling that we get great productivity, employees who want to make a meaningful contribution.”

“Technology has a meaningful role to play in fostering collaborative learning.”

## Understand and enable learning while working

How can workers adapt (and ideally, thrive) amid the increased use of AI, cognitive technologies and other disruptors to traditional workflows? The answer is this: Become continuous learners and knowledge sharers. Today, much of this learning must occur during the workday, where many people spend most of their time. This is known as “learning while working” or “learning in the flow of work.”

“Learning in the flow of work” moves development from the periphery of the employee experience — day-long courses, 5-minute videos, traditional synchronous and asynchronous e-learning — to its core. As quoted in the *Harvard Business Review*, Josh Bersin and Marc Zao-Sanders state that “for learning to really happen, it must fit around and align itself to working days and working lives.” Corporate learning is no longer a “destination”<sup>v</sup> but rather something that is delivered to employees, conveniently accessible always via continually evolving technology.

“Learning while working” means using technology to make learning part of the very fabric of work. “You don’t have to put work on hold while you’re learning,” says Loew. “Technology, by making learning a natural part of everyday tasks, can eliminate the time employees are physically or cognitively separate from work. This, in turn, increases productivity.”

### Action to consider

- **Consider using tools designed to make learning integral to everyday work life.** Rather than rely solely on a learning platform for development (e.g., LMS, LXP/LEP, social collaboration tools, performance support technologies), vanguard L&D departments are also turning to tools that integrate content directly into employees’ daily work tools. Increasingly, microlearning opportunities are available within Microsoft Office, Slack and Salesforce, among others.

Learning is also increasingly targeted, automatically, to minimize learning’s effect on overall productivity. According to Josh Bersin, industry analyst and founder of Bersin by Deloitte, “A key part of this new market is making content most relevant for each user ... We want the learning and support materials to be so perfectly targeted that we immediately look at them, learn and go back to work.”<sup>vi</sup>

## Apply programs, solutions and technologies that optimize collaborative learning

A fundamental part of the new work paradigm is that learning isn’t just within the flow of individual work. It is also now highly group-oriented, collaborative and decentralized. Research shows that collaborative learning, when done right, accelerates the collective intelligence of an organization — a potentially powerful competitive differentiator in an era of constant change.

“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. When people come together to solve a business problem, you gain greater organizational intellectual property and intelligence than if you were to ask each person to solve the problem individually,” Loew says. “It’s the same with learning. When people learn together, they become collectively something greater by hearing and responding to each other’s insights and informed observations.”

Just as with learning in the flow of work, technology has a meaningful role to play in fostering collaborative learning. New tools enable the continuous flow of knowledge between individuals and groups. A meta-analysis of more than 400 studies found that learners who used technology to collaborate with peers “achieved significantly greater knowledge gains, exhibited better skills, including critical thinking and reasoning, and had more positive perceptions.”<sup>vii</sup>

#### Action to consider

- **Better manage and distribute informal knowledge and employee insights.** Historically, peer-to-peer knowledge has been more informal and unmanaged — and traditionally not the responsibility of L&D. According to Danna, that’s changing rapidly. “Using technology to make individual experience, wisdom and insight available to a large, distributed learning population not only helps people learn more effectively but also optimizes the productivity of the workforce.”

## A new business imperative

Despite the need for a workforce full of critical thinkers solving complex business problems faster, few businesses are prepared with such a team of employees. Leading organizations are solving the conundrum with investment in new purpose-built technology.

With the future of work predictions, enabling all employees with the means to analyze information, create and share knowledge and insights, and apply meaningful observations in the context of their work and business goals is a new and necessary direction for business and HR leaders. “Innovative leaders are already adopting new collaboration and insight-sharing technology to address tomorrow’s business imperatives — to become more agile, and to adapt to new situations and thrive amid ongoing change,” Danna says. Optimizing current HCM stacks by adding insight curation technology will enable the elevated performance and productivity levels required of tomorrow’s workforces.

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