

# CLOSING THE GAP:

Preparing Employees for  
the Jobs of the Future



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# Introduction

For several years now, HR has been having a vibrant conversation around the topic of the Future of Work and it has led to some consensus around the skills that will be necessary, the type of work that will be done and the people that will prove most valuable in the workplace. Where consensus has been lacking was when this future would become a reality.

Was it already here? Was it five years down the road? Ask three people that question and you were likely to get three different answers. Since the arrival of COVID-19, however, the differences in opinion have started to flatten. That future is now and the need for reskilling and upskilling people has never been greater.

The talent market has been flooded with job seekers due to rising unemployment and economic uncertainty plagues many organizations as the world awaits what a post COVID reality holds next.

A May 2020 report from McKinsey & Company<sup>1</sup> shows that leaders across a variety of industries expect investment and activity in recruiting to slow significantly over the following 12 months. Other areas of the business such as learning and development and engaging and connecting with employees is set to climb on their list of priorities.

On top of that list, however, is an internal conversation about what the future looks like as one-third of respondents said they intend to invest more in workforce planning, strategy and change. What does that conversation look like then? What areas should leaders be focused on in developing their teams? And how do they go about creating and executing a strategy to prepare employees for the jobs of the future? This report will aim to answer those questions and provide expert insight into how every organization should begin the process of closing the skills gap.

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# The Reskilling Ecosystem

Effectively reskilling the workforce takes time, a lot of cross functional coordination and effort from key members of the organization, namely HR and learning and development functions. To do it effectively, organizations need to follow a five-step path to reach the point they're preparing people for growth and the responsibilities future roles will hold.



## THE FIVE STEPS:



### Workforce assessment and planning

You can't know where you're going unless you know where you've been and what you have to work with.



### Integrate technology where needed

If possible, automate inane tasks that are essentially a waste of human effort and integrate or develop tools that enhance the abilities of your human capital.



### Commit to L&D

Reskilling requires harnessing the right tools, techniques and teams of people to create learning pathways and content which drive organizational growth.



### Inspire collaboration

Learning is a social activity. Create a space where professional ties develop clearly, ideas can flow, communication is open and there are no barriers to entry for ambitious people who want to learn new things.



### Create a culture of learning and agility

Amplify and reward those who prioritize learning and working cross functionally.

Where once L&D teams had to convince leadership to commit to their slice of the budget, the current landscape is putting more power in the hands of learning leaders to ask for more. Nothing is off the table so to speak, but those teams have to justify that investment.

"L&D organizations have an incredible opportunity to implement innovative solutions while keeping their budgets intact," Ken Hubbell, Senior Vice President for Instructional Design Strategy & Innovation at Wells Fargo said. "Budget scrutiny is more intense these days, and that means being keenly selective for the types of courses you need to produce.

Avoid knowledge training and focus on behavioral skills that have knowledge built in as resources for the scenarios learners will experience. Use video and virtual classrooms and virtual reality when it significantly adds value, not just because it's cool."

# Making the Most of What You Have

The pandemic sparked record high unemployment numbers, with more than 30 million people out of work in the U.S. This has caused a drastic shift in the way organizations are thinking about their workforces. A year ago, the battle for talent was as fierce as it's ever been and much of the focus was on getting in highly skilled workers who could help the company close skill gaps.



The current reality looks quite different, however. A May 2020 report from Deloitte<sup>2</sup> indicated that 74% of organizations see reskilling their current workforce as a vital component to their success over the next 12-18 months. At the same time, a mere 10% feel they are ready to do so.

That number reflects the confidence level that organizations have in terms of being able to see what they need from their employees next, but identifying that was always going to take time as COVID-19 is causing some businesses to re-evaluate how they do business from a technology standpoint as well as their supply chains, marketing strategies, sales teams and quality assurance. And that uncertainty can breed more uncertainty, undermining the reskilling conversation as employees aren't sure what is and will be expected of them.

"We are more capable of helping to fill the skill gap than we are the confidence gap," Michael Arena, Vice President of Talent and Development at Amazon Web Services said. "Once an individual has demonstrated mastery of one domain, it is an emotional challenge to ask them to jump into a whole new domain. For me, the biggest challenge is on the cultural side and this is social in nature. We need to move beyond reskilling and invest in community building around these new domains so that people can learn new skills, yes, but

also practice and then apply them. The reinforcement of a peer can go a long way in helping an individual to move up the curve on confidence."

People are viewing employment differently these days. Things are competitive, opportunities are fewer and employees know this. Many are looking at their jobs in a different light and are more likely to be receptive to the reskilling conversation than they may have been before. This is conducive to creating what a report from Gartner<sup>3</sup> refers to as "connected learners", or individuals in tune with learning and development opportunities that can be done with peers and suit their passions. Research suggests that these people are 66% more likely to be engaged with their work and 8 times as likely to be high performers.

"Prior to COVID it was a very tight labor market and we did not want to lose any good employee who needed to be re-skilled" Larry Brand, Chief Human Resources Officer at Elkay Manufacturing said. "We invest heavily in automation and Manufacturing 4.0 to reskill our production workers and make them more versatile across the plants. Post COVID (until the labor market gets back on track) it can be a very transparent conversation with the employee about re-skilling and job growth versus job loss. All understand and usually respond positively to this type of conversation."



# The Force of Automation

Part of what is driving this conversation around reskilling is that automation was increasing even before COVID-19 began wreaking havoc with the labor market. Fear around automation was high as many believed it would lead to massive job losses, a fact that CEOs recognize impacts how the organization is viewed. A report from PwC<sup>4</sup> last year noted that half of CEOs see that lack of trust as a threat to business and recognize that how they handle automation would put that to the test.

But as the world finds itself navigating mass layoffs for reasons other than automation, the conversation has shifted to pondering how automation can help the current workforce be more efficient.

"We were already going through a profound transformation with the increase in automation and digitalization of processes in our organizations," Gabrielle Botelho, HR Director at geoscience company CGG said. "Today, the complexity, speed and transformation we are facing with the pandemic brings us to a new challenge: develop leaders capable of supporting and guiding their employees during times of crisis. We observe the need to change behavior and develop new skills in our employees as well; in order to not only maintain our business, but also being able to project a future."

As leaders look at automation as part of their overall workforce planning strategy, they need to consider it a part of their workforce resilience goals that will hopefully protect the business against market volatility. A report from Ernst & Young<sup>5</sup> outlines what it refers to as the four pillars of workforce planning and optimization. They are:



## Capacity

Consider the role of automation and strategic redeployment of workers whose roles have been automated.



## Cost

An examination of the financial impact of crisis as well as the skills and backgrounds in a workforce to ensure a good mix and amount of employees.



## Capability

A deeper look at the future skills the organization will need so that employees can acquire new skills.



## Composition

Deepening the talent ecosystem across new platforms to meet expectations of a multi-generational workforce.

"Before the crisis, the World Economic Forum<sup>6</sup> released its Jobs of Tomorrow report that estimated around 75 million jobs would be displaced due to automation and technological integration in the coming years," Botelho said. "Which raises concerns about large-scale unemployment and increasing income inequality. However, the good news is that the transformation will also create demand for an estimated 133 million new jobs, with new opportunities to satisfy people's potential and aspirations. It's important that we are all attentive and willing to rethink our career to remain attractive in such a volatile market."



"Even more now, L&D is not a 'nice to have' thing. When we think about a strategy to deliver capabilities for the future, it's about creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge to promote business growth."

**GABRIELLE BOTELHO**

HR Director at geoscience company CGG

# L&D in the Driver's Seat

As organizations have started to examine their options for reskilling people, learning and development came into focus pretty quickly. Learning leaders were suddenly inundated with requests for digital learning assets and executives walked into L&D budget conversations with a different sense of urgency than they had before.

Digital learning is on the uptick in most organizations anyhow as the conversations about skills gaps and using L&D as a benefit has long been a part of many employer's practices. Following the arrival of COVID-19, however, L&D is an even more vital component to all organizations as in-person trainings have become an unnecessary risk to take in many cases. As a report from McKinsey & Co<sup>7</sup> earlier this year noted: "keeping people safe and reducing risk has, for now, displaced cost as the key driver behind digital learning."

"L&D has been pushing for virtual training and virtual reality content for over a decade," Hubbell said. "COVID-19 hit at a key point in the development cycle and readiness for organizations to take the proverbial leap of faith out of necessity. Fortunately, technologies like Zoom, Oculus, and authoring tools like Captivate VR and Unity 3D were at the ready and many learning organizations had R&D efforts already underway that enabled their organizations

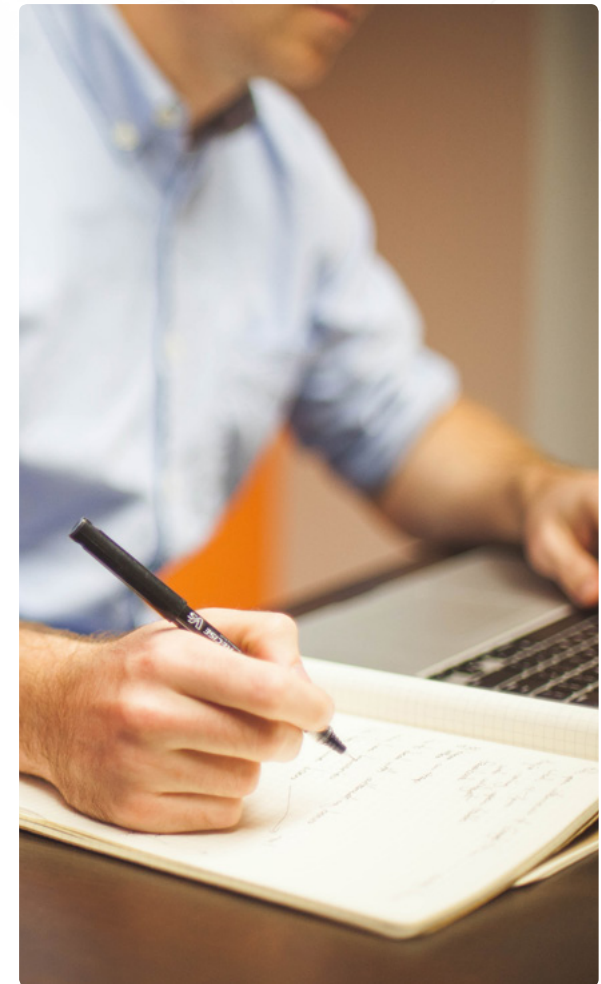
to pivot. In some cases, this pivot extended into other areas of talent management from conducting interviews to supporting other HR functions like performance reviews."

The pivot has an impact on people as well. As Hubbell points out, the current crop of employees that are going through reskilling and learning efforts are yielding evidence as to what learning approaches are most effective and which technology partners are going to be vital going forward.

"One beneficial yet unintended outcome of our current quarantine situation is we are rapidly identifying the best virtual coaches, peer mentors and online training facilitators," Hubbell said. "My hope is that these superstars level the playing field for education and that they partner with local resources to round out the educational support for all generations. This will ensure the talent pipeline doesn't go dry."

The future for L&D in the short term is as unpredictable as any other aspect of business. If a vaccine is uncovered in the near future, things may return to something resembling normal. If, on the other hand, 2021 arrives and science is no closer to delivering a vaccine than we are today, then technology adoption and integration will become

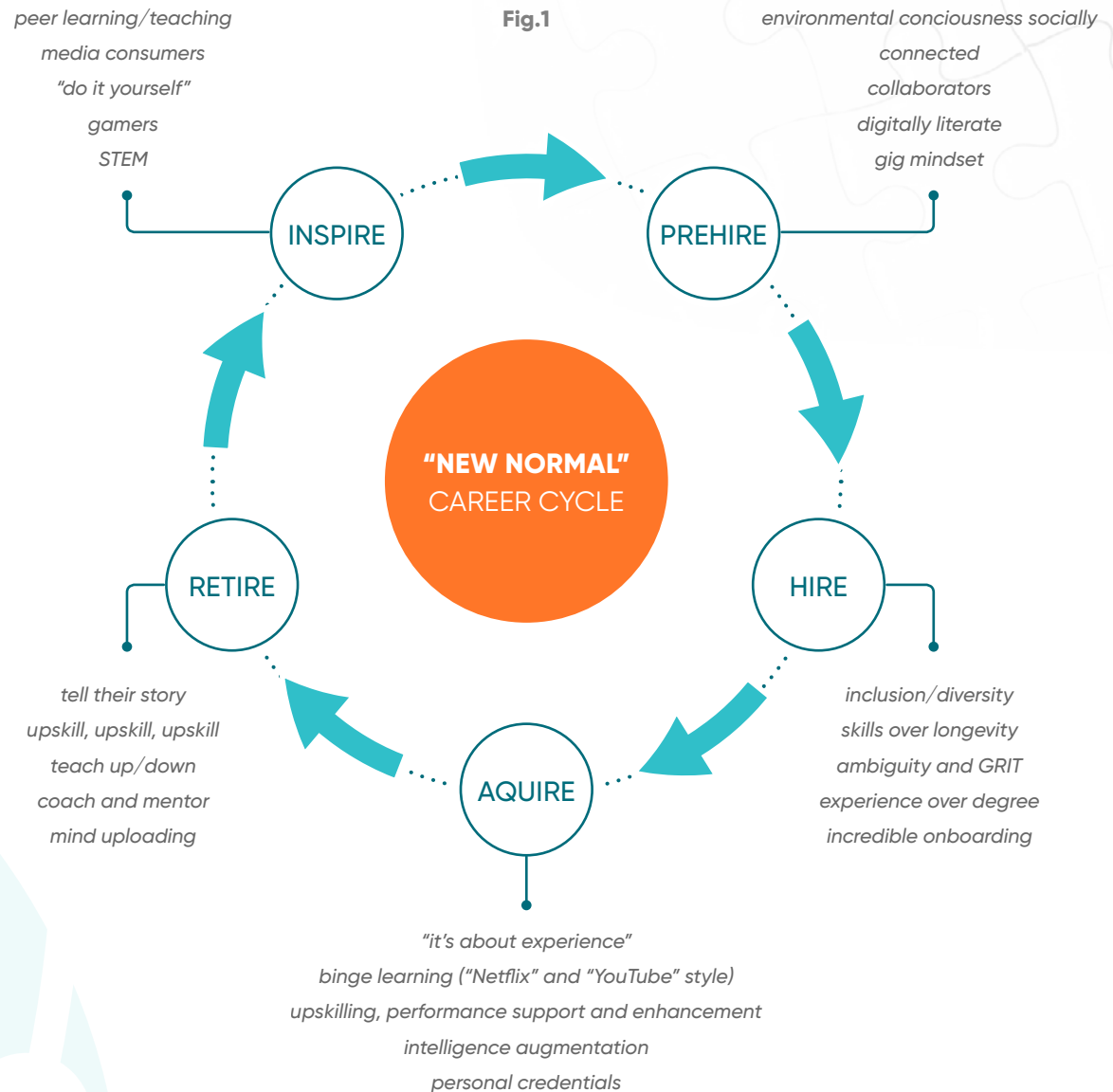
the minimum requirement just to offer the learning opportunities that employees expect, to say nothing of reskilling entire segments of the workforce.



## » L&D in the Driver's Seat

What is predictable is that L&D is going to be central to creating what Hubbell refers to as new "career cycles," which some people may go through 4-to-8 times in their life. The model depicted in Fig.1 shows how people can be managed through a continuous process of not just advancing in a career, but radically moving from areas of specialization to keep up with the speed of technological change.

"COVID-19 has clearly demonstrated what jobs can be done on your couch, home office or the beach," Hubbell said. "XR, or extended reality, includes augmented reality, virtual reality, integrated IoT, Zoom sessions and telepresence. For those of us in learning & development, the transformation has been startling and fast. Organizations that said that it couldn't be done or that training must be in person and that they will never have a virtual workforce have pivoted to stay in business. We have converted classroom training programs to virtual instructor led training or other learning formats in record time. The stars finally aligned for virtual to be the norm. Even when we start going back, we changed the rules of the game forever because we proved we can do it."



# A Collaborative Ecosystem

As learning takes center stage and employees begin to challenge themselves in learning new things, one thing that is becoming more widely discussed is the need to democratize learning. While learning content should be curated to suit specific roles, there is a great deal that employees can learn from each other and from having access to training in areas they have an interest in.

Fostering an environment where this occurs though can be difficult, particularly at a time when many employees aren't interacting in physical workspaces. That means companies have to create a culture of learning, collaboration and agility to create constant development, so much so that it becomes part of the company identity.

The guiding principle should be a steady diet of self-disruption to keep up with quickly changing markets. Arena sometimes refers to this as creating an adaptive space where ideas and outside of the box thinking can thrive.

"The only way this can happen is if novel ideas flow freely among teams, across departments, and throughout a company," Arena said. "It turns out, this requires a shift from human capital to social capital. Adaptive Space enables organizations to better understand how different social arrangements can

help to generate, incubate and scale ideas. In a virtual context, this is even more important. We must be far more intentional about staying connected to the customer and collaborating with other teams."

One of the methods you hear mentioned when you begin to look at employees collaborating for their own development is the democratization of learning. On paper, that sounds like a great idea and a surefire way to build a community around learning, but it's not necessarily that easy.

"Democratizing learning means a lot of different things to different people," Hubbell said. "Should everyone in an organization have access to all the courses in corporate LMS inventory? Should the inventory include content external to the corporate library of approved programs? Should there be user generated content? I think the solution is less about the tools – there are plenty of them and the list grows almost daily – and more about asking what your company is trying to achieve from its learning organization. This is not a one-size-fits-all solution. It may also mean reaching outside or your organization to educational partners and alternative training programs like apprenticeships to achieve the results you desire."



"Adaptive Space enables organizations to better understand how different social arrangements can help to generate, incubate and scale ideas."

**MICHAEL ARENA**

VP of Talent & Development,  
Amazon Web Services



# The Culture of Learning and Agility

Organizational culture is changing as issues surrounding trust have surfaced during the pandemic and teams that have gone remote have embraced it in different ways. But one thing that hasn't changed is that leaders set the tone and people within the organization have to see executives and management practicing what they preach.



"Executive management must lead by example," Brand said. "Those actions will either support or fly in conflict with the word agility. If there are too many priorities or conflicting priorities that remain unchanged, people will give up on agility and only view it as being aspirational. Further, technology and process must support the desire to be agile. Long drawn out processes, red tape, and slow decision-making (especially at the top of the organization) are the items that shut down agility."

A culture of continuous learning begets a culture of agility. But how do we instill that culture of learning to start the process of building teams that can evolve with the needs of the business and the demands of the marketplace? Essentially, there are three key components to this.



## Hire or Retain Good Learners

People with a passion for learning don't often have to be inspired and can help spread that desire for learning throughout the organization. When interviewing prospects or assessing current employees, there are certain characteristics to look for. For example, do they have passion projects? People who are continuously learning tend to pursue projects outside of their jobs, whether that's video production or DIY projects. If the person says they

don't have any, it may be a sign of someone who tends to get stuck in their ways.

Another characteristic is a natural curiosity. This is as valuable as any hard skill, because hard skills tend to come more naturally to people who are always learning new things. That natural curiosity will drive the employee development and helps them become accustomed to asking the right questions to get to the heart of a problem.

Finally, good learners will display humility as a trait. The first hurdle to overcome in developing a learning mindset is helping someone admit that they don't know something. In times of strife for the business, humble employees tend to be more inclined to drop their usual routines to adjust practices and develop new ways of doing things so that they can be more efficient and help the business in other ways.



## Develop a Learning Policy

While culture is more than policy and procedures that make up an employee handbook, the content of those policies do play an integral part in forming culture. Declaring learning as a value is a start, but it won't be until it is built into performance management and employee goal setting that you begin to see it have a real impact on the business.

## » The Culture of Learning and Agility

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By prioritizing and measuring it, leaders create an environment where people view continuous learning as part of their core function.

Much like technological innovation is a cultural policy and benefit packages are a part of employee experience that impact engagement, a good learning policy needs a budget behind it. By making it a core component of the employee experience through various mechanisms – such as tuition assistance for those who want to pursue higher education and prioritizing learning during work

hours – leadership can provide a morale boost and naturally drive learning as a core value. Younger workers from the Millennial and Gen Z demographics consider growth and development opportunities such as these important workplace benefits, according to research from Gallup<sup>8</sup>.

### ✕ Don't Punish Failure

Part of the learning process is making mistakes and failing. It's rare someone picks something up and succeeds on the first try. However, there's a

difference between failure and negligence. Help draw that line for your employees so that behaviors conducive to innovation and learning can shine. Conditioning teams to fail eliminates the fear of trying new things that may be unorthodox and ultimately not work. Some of the ideas and practices that come out of that way of thinking, however, will serve the business well in times where agility and creativity are needed to survive a crisis.



# Closing the Gap

Closing the skills gap is one of the biggest challenges companies have faced in recent history and the importance of doing it has only accelerated in the wake of the events that have unfolded in 2020. As businesses adjust how they operate and some consider entirely new business models in the post pandemic era, developing a workforce that can adjust with it is vital to success.

If businesses have one thing going in their favor though, it's that employees now see the challenges as clearly as leaders do. There is a natural understanding that these are difficult times and people within the organization will have to work differently to help the business overcome it. With

that at the front of people's minds, it won't be hard to convince them to come along for the journey to close the skills gap.

"My personal view is that it is an enduring truth that people want to develop and grow," Arena said. "Therefore, the real barrier to the evolution process is emotional. This is why organizations need to create an environment where every person can unleash their full human potential. Organizations can't stop at bringing the best people in, they also have to bring the best out of every person. Everybody wants to more fully engage and grow."



"The real barrier to the evolution process is emotional. This is why organizations need to create an environment where every person can unleash their full human potential."

**MICHAEL ARENA**  
VP of Talent & Development,  
Amazon Web Services

## Resources

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8. <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/197234/millennials-job-hopping-inevitable.aspx>



# Q&A with **Penn Foster**



**Dara Warn**  
Chief Customer Officer,  
Penn Foster

**As a company that has long been in the business of offering online education and training, are there lessons that Penn Foster has learned through the years that corporate learning is just coming around to?**

Education is being re-imagined. In this new world, both ground-based and online schools use a range of learning models that uniquely target wide audiences with different needs. Frank Britt, Penn Foster's CEO, says, "The nontraditional student has become the traditional student. Today's students do not have a typical age or income level. Instead, they are all lifelong learners pursuing their educational goals throughout their lifespans."

Corporate learning and development professionals have an opportunity to rethink the ways in which training is administered and what the goals of that training are. Rather than looking at training as a box

that needs to be checked off, it can be a tool to not only increase performance of teams, but can foster long term employee growth and loyalty.

**Learning & development offerings can also be an important part of how benefits packages are structured. If you're building out L&D as a benefit, what do you see as being the most important elements of that package?**

As we move toward a new economy and navigate a future of work that we couldn't have predicted even last year, employers should consider adjusting their hiring requirements and provide comprehensive and efficient training to workers. Some elements to include in an L&D benefit include:

**Apprenticeships** that combine experience and education into one valuable package. The employer provides opportunities for hands on learning, while the training partner delivers foundational knowledge and vital context. Throughout the learning process, employees are on the job and using their skills for the benefit of the business.

**Targeted skills training** helps employees build the specific skills essential to their workplace. Because the training is tightly focused, workers can complete

it more quickly. The employer knows that the training is exactly what the employee needs to meet the specific demands of their industry.

**Microcredentials** are an even more targeted training option that focuses on a single skill at a time. They're perfect for employees who already have a strong foundation but need to polish their skills in a specific area.

**Tuition assistance** is one way to help those employees who do need a college degree or professional certification. By minimizing or removing the barrier of cost, employers make higher education more accessible to every employee.

**A big struggle for some L&D teams has been the volume of learning content going online as well as taking in-person training into a virtual setting. What advice do you have for companies as they navigate this transition and attempt to set priorities for their learning programs in this remote environment?**

Despite the wide use of online tools, it's still often difficult for some to become fully acclimated to learning on a digital platform—at least at



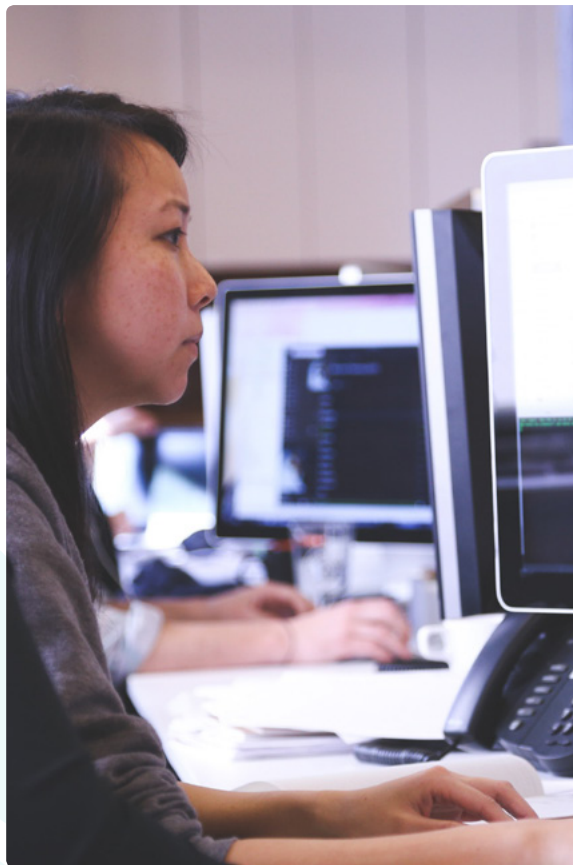




first. However, as online training continues to gain momentum, it's crucial to ensure that employees and learners have the resources available to succeed. Easing workers into digital learning starts with helping them understand how their online training courses work, including where and when to access their study materials. This can be accomplished relatively quickly by doing the following:

- » *Provide learners with as much information as possible. Before enrolling them into your training and development programs, provide eligible employees with the requirements to qualify and the expectations you have for progress. This allows learners to plan and gives them the opportunity to assess which training options seem appropriate.*
- » *Offer comprehensive support. Whether support comes from a point person in human resources or through your training provider, having access to someone who can answer questions and guide them when they're stuck can be a lifesaver for your program.*
- » *Emphasize a self-paced learning model. Your training program should have clear goals and progress expectations, but there should also be a level of flexibility. No two people necessarily learn at the same speed or through the same process. Stressing a study schedule can discourage*

*learners who fear they'll fall behind. Instead, emphasize a self-paced approach. While there's an overall program completion due date, allowing each learner to move through training at the pace that works best for them not only eases anxiety—it can ensure that your workers are retaining the information they're absorbing.*



**The skills gap is something that has been talked about for a long time but has not been addressed. Where does L&D have to grow in order to prepare workers for the future?**

Conversations about the country's skills gap often don't mention middle-skilled jobs, which require education beyond high school, but not a four-year degree. These jobs account for more than half of the United States' labor market, but less than half of the country's workers are trained to the middle-skill level.

In an industry like manufacturing, which was already feeling the worker deficit pre-COVID, companies are seeing impact on their profits and ability to take on new opportunities. In the first quarter of this year, 25% of manufacturers say they've had to turn down business opportunities because of a lack of workers. By 2030, experts say there could be a worker deficit of about 7.9 million people in manufacturing alone.

Adding to the lack of tech training that fuels the skills gap, it's projected that 10,000 Baby Boomers will turn 65 and retire each day over the next 20 years making filling vacant roles feel like an endless task. The Millennial and Generation-Z workers replacing them will either be under-prepared





for the work, lack the degrees or certifications the employer is requiring, or feel no shame about leaving the company after a short period to start down a new, just as rewarding career path.

**The learning experience is changing, and will likely forever be changed by this COVID period now that learners know what is possible in a virtual setting - as do those facilitating their learning. What do you think will be the biggest shift in learning experience over the next couple of years?**

As we chart a path to economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, it will not be enough for the country to revert only to the traditional approaches and practices that have typified our approach to education and training thus far. Programs need to be accessible so learners don't have to sacrifice an income in order to learn a new skill.

It means prioritizing affordability by encouraging investment, both public and private, in programs that are aligned to the needs of the workforce. It means rethinking the way we recognize skills, so that instead of the binary degree-or-no-degree approach, we recognize the full spectrum of experiences and competencies that define how an individual performs at work.

**When you look at the way innovation is happening around corporate learning, what are some of the developments that excite you the most as someone involved in L&D?**

Training and development will always play a big role for organizations. As business leaders face mounting pressure to pursue approaches that not only reflect, but anticipate, the shifting relationship between employers and workers, outskilling is an area where many organizations have an opportunity to evolve and improve.

The practice of outskilling helps organizations promote overall positive employee sentiment, helps participants land higher-paying jobs, improves organization branding and reputation by being socially responsible and results in a reduction in layoff-related lawsuits.

While the COVID-19 pandemic didn't create the need for outskilling, it may accelerate the momentum at which outskilling programs become available at leading employers. Preparing outgoing employees for future success will be a critical component of the changing social contract that may be the difference between long-term success or stagnation for businesses







Penn Foster is bridging the gap between education and economic opportunity to build the workforce of tomorrow. We partner with employers to design and deliver digital and blended learning programs that attract, upskill, and retain workers in America's fastest-growing fields and professions. With more than 40,000 graduates each year, Penn Foster helps individuals discover pathways to opportunity through accredited diploma, certificate and degree programs that matter in the world of work.

Penn Foster's curriculum in middle-skill fields, including veterinary, healthcare, and skilled trades, is used by more than 300,000 learners each year. Together with our extensive partner network of leading employers, community-based organizations, and academic institutions, we close skills gaps and are building a stronger workforce through education and skills training. We aim to help businesses thrive by mobilizing their individual workers and energizing communities with opportunities for growth and progress.



# Our Contributors



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# About the HR Exchange Network

HR Exchange Network engages a community of more than 270,000 HR professionals across our digital platforms. HREN provides news and educational content from our staff, contributors, columnists and sponsors, including research reports, news, videos, podcasts, articles and more. HR Exchange Network is a division of IQPC Digital, which leverages a global research base of best

practices to produce an unrivalled portfolio of problem solving conferences.

Our world-class conferences and online B2B communities give us unique access to markets and senior decision makers. We've built a reputation founded on providing our audience of influential leaders with critical business insight.

We have a global research base and our network has grown to 18 core communities reaching more than 1.1 million opt-in members and a wider database of more than 9.6 million people.



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