OpenSesame

Upskilling and Reskilling:

5 Ways L&D Can Close Skills Gaps to Keep Pace with Change

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Introduction

If the past few years have taught us anything, it's that nothing is certain. In response to factors like the pandemic, new generations of employees entering the workforce and the increasing pace of technological change, businesses have had to shift the way they do business in fundamental ways.

With change this frequent, it's no wonder that leaders are challenged with keeping pace, especially when one of the top trends in L&D in 2023 is upskilling, reskilling, and the rise of cross-skilling. To follow suit, many companies are investing in upskilling and reskilling initiatives to prepare employees for changes in their roles.

The faster things change, the more often organizations will need to upskill their people. Organizations will need to adopt a culture of continuous learning to keep pace with change moving forward. This means that learners can no longer wait for a formal training event to become available to fill their skills gaps. Rather, they need to access learning resources in the flow of work, enabling them to consume learning in small bites throughout their day-to-day.

Let's take a closer look at some of the factors that have combined to upend the way we do business.

Disruptors and Disruption

Organizations have been struggling against the dual forces of stagnation and acceleration. The accelerating pace of work didn't start with the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was certainly compounded by it.

While many businesses had been experimenting with remote or hybrid work for years, it wasn't until 2020 that organizations were forced to roll out their own remote work solutions — regardless of whether they were ready to adopt this work arrangement.

This shift to remote work forced organizations to accelerate their digital transformation efforts. Many companies invested in new tools and technologies to work more efficiently and needed to upskill employees to effectively use those tools. In turn, organizations were challenged with ensuring employees had the necessary skills to be successful in their roles.

Adding to these challenges, many organizations have grappled with high turnover rates and low employee engagement, fueled by The Great Resignation. Organizations that have been successful in navigating disruption have leveraged learning and development (L&D) to create a culture of continuous learning — a culture that prioritizes employee development to ensure long-term business success.

The Widening Skills Gaps

"Skills gaps" refer to the gap between the skills an employee currently possesses and the skills they need to perform a job. With the current rate of change, gaps are arising more suddenly — and frequently — than ever before. Left unchecked, skills gaps will only get worse over time, leading to negative impacts on the business's bottom line. So, what begins with the adoption of new technology to expedite processes can actually have the opposite effect if workforces aren't properly trained in how to effectively use the tools.

The Difference Between Upskilling and Reskilling

While they're often used interchangeably, upskilling and reskilling are distinct processes:

Upskilling refers to the process of building upon your employees' already existing skill sets and strengths. Usually, it means making an employee more effective in their current role or job function.

Reskilling, on the other hand, refers to training aimed at developing your employees for job functions and tasks outside of their current role or skill set.

A variety of factors can lead an organization to upskill or reskill employees. For example, the adoption of a new industry-standard technology can impact business processes and how employees perform their jobs. An organization might invest in upskilling to make sure that everyone has the skills they need to utilize this new tool to its fullest potential.

Additionally, automation might render parts of the workforce redundant; rather than lose those employees (and their years of experience), an organization might decide to reskill them for other roles.

L&D Approaches To Close Skills Gaps

Upskilling and reskilling initiatives are challenging — from identifying skills gaps to delivering the right training at the right time. Luckily, advancing technology can help L&D professionals more efficiently upskill and reskill employees, enabling learners to access training when and where they need it most. Let's consider some common benefits and challenges of hybrid work as they relate to DEI in more detaill.

When designing training, learning leaders must keep the learner in mind to maximize success. While technology can optimize training processes, learning must be human-centered and focused on the needs of the learner. For instance, the possibilities of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) are exciting but these tools should always be used in service of your people and their unique needs.

Let's examine five ways organizations can effectively close skills gap to keep pace with change.

1. Identify Skill Gaps

A needs analysis — the formal, systematic process of identifying the specific training needs of an individual or group of employees — will show you where your employees' skills may be lacking.

To conduct a needs analysis, L&D leaders typically start by considering business needs. It helps to know what your organizational leadership expects from learners before the outset. Consider the goals of the stakeholders and sponsors of the project, as well as their expected timeframe and the number of employees that would be impacted by the training.

Learning leaders should collect important data and metrics from learning platforms to help identify skills gaps and pinpoint learning needs. L&D can also meet with learners to better understand the challenges that they face in their role to identify where knowledge gaps exist. All this information can help learning leaders assess the learning needs of their organization and create an effective training plan.

"Before you can close skills gaps, you must first understand what skills gaps exist in your organization."

2. Enable Access to Learning In the Flow of Work

Putting people first means understanding the types of training that work best for your people (rather than trying to fit your learners into a one-size-fits-all solution). In 2023, that means embracing the concept of learning in the flow of work; making training available in small chunks, accessible at a learner's time of need, in a way that doesn't disrupt their workflow.

Self-paced learning allows learners to engage with training at their convenience, meaning they're able to get their training done in small chunks throughout the day. With learners feeling like they have less free time than ever before, this can make the difference between engagement and disengagement.

In addition to making learning available at the learners' point of need, it's crucial to create training content using a variety of different modalities (video, games, infographics, job aids, etc.). When you increase the diversity of your offerings, you increase the likelihood that your learners will find training in a method that they prefer. This leads to higher levels of engagement and retention.

3. Support Personalized Learning Journeys

Employees want opportunities to learn, and they want the experience to be customized based on their learning needs. According to LinkedIn Learning's 2022 Workplace Learning Report,

Using personalized learning journeys for upskilling initiatives can meet learners where they are on their journey. By developing your training content with your learners in mind, you can ensure that the end product is something that they'll be enthusiastic about engaging with (rather than dreading or avoiding). There are several ways to do this, but some key approaches include:

- Talk to your employees about where they want to be in five years. Their career goals will tell you a lot about their motivations when it comes to learning.

- Choose a learning experience platform (LXP) that has AI and ML capabilities. These can help automate the process of understanding each individual learner's skills and skills gaps, and they can respond in real-time as they learn and grow.

> "Employees are more motivated to learn if training is **personalized specifically to their interests and career goals** and if it helps them stay up to date in their career field."

# 4. Amplify People Development Through Performance Management

In the early days of learning management systems (LMSs), learning typically lived on its own platform. It was easily accessible, but learners had to seek it out and block out time on their calendars if they wanted to gain new skills. With the increasing pace of change, the status quo has changed.

Now, it's expected that a learning platform will integrate with other technologies and take a far more active role in the management, rather than just the delivery, of the training experience.

For example, think about your training like the health app you might find on a smart watch. You start with an end goal in mind, and then the technology helps you break that down into smaller, daily goals. Not only that, but it provides you with helpful reminders and insights gleaned from analytics.

The great thing about modern learning technology is that it no longer needs to be isolated in its own platform. Rather, it can be embedded within your organization's messaging platform of choice, so that training is delivered to your learners through the

channels they're already engaged with in their day-to-day. With the increasing pace of modern work, you don't want your learners to have to disengage from whatever they're doing to open and sign into their LMS.
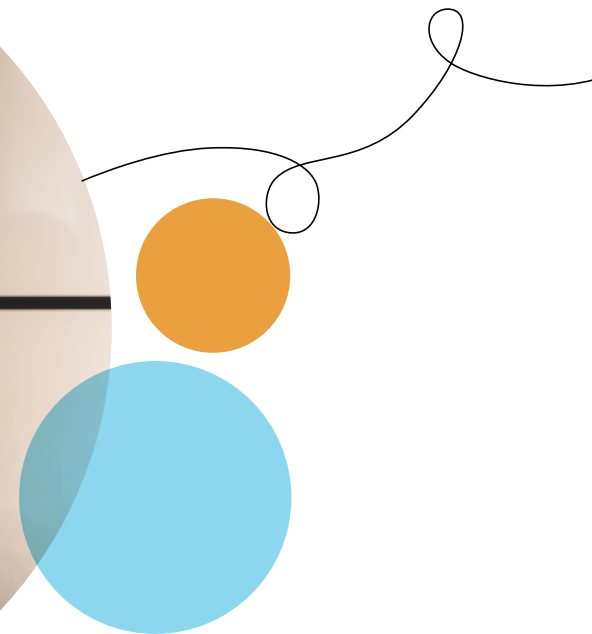
5. Connect Learning to Wider People Practices

Don't silo L&D within your organization. L&D should connect and collaborate with other business functions.

For example, L&D could collaborate with the company's human resources (HR) department to tie organizational rewards to training. Completion of a specific training might be a prerequisite for applying for a promotion, or you might consider rewarding proactive learners with extra PTO days. In both cases, what's important is that you are taking the learner's career motivations into account.

By directly connecting learning to career mobility and advancement, you can encourage your learners to look for their next opportunity internally, rather than applying for a position with another company. This can help organizations engage and retain talent long term.

Partnering with other business units can increase the impact of L&D, allowing employees to take the next step in their career.
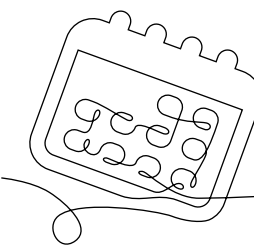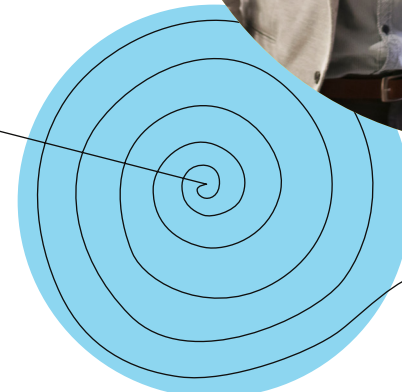
Conclusion

If you're worried about skills gaps, you're not alone. The good news is, there are more tools and resources at your disposal than ever before. To optimize success, your approach should always be people first, tools second. In other words, your technology choices should always be in service of meeting the unique needs of your organization's learners, rather than trying to fit people into one-size-fits-all solutions.

While there are many variables to consider, successful training initiatives will depend on:

- **Identify existing skills gaps across the organization.**

- **Enabling access to learning in the flow of work.**

- **Creating personalized learning journeys.**

- **People development that's amplified by performance management.**

- **Connecting learning to wider HR practices.**

With all these things in mind, you can create engaging training that prepares employees with the skills they need to be successful in their current and future role.

About Us

OpenSesame's vision is a world where everyone can easily access the training they need to advance their purpose and to help companies develop the world's most productive and admired workforces. To do this, OpenSesame harnesses the power of technology to help organizations of all sizes deploy training and learning to do great things — in every industry.

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