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STRATEGY GUIDE



Strategic Shift: Skills-Powered Organizations in the Age of AI

Strategic Shift: Skills-Powered Organizations in the Age of AI 1

- Making Skills a Top Priority
- Developing a Skills-Powered Workforce: The Benefits
- Overcoming Cultural Challenges
- Transforming the Talent Pipeline
- Creating a Skills-Powered Organization: One Company’s Story
- Embracing a Skills-Powered Future

States Make Strides With Skills-Powered Hiring 4

Checklist: Building a Skills-Powered Organization..... 7

Sponsor’s Viewpoint..... 8

CONTENTS

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Strategic Shift: Skills-Powered Organizations in the Age of AI

Today's Workforce Challenges

As technology innovation accelerates, the methods organizations use to get work done are changing rapidly as well. To succeed amid new work options such as generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), machine learning, and automation, companies need the knowledge and skills to deploy these technologies strategically, use them effectively, make adaptations as they evolve, and understand how they will substitute, augment, or otherwise transform human work.

There's no question that new and emerging digital technologies will have a profound effect on the nature of work. Employers estimate that 44% of workers' skills will be disrupted by technology in the next five years, according to the World Economic Forum's 2023 **"Future of Jobs"** report. Six in 10 workers will require additional training before 2027, according to the same report.

Dealing with a skills gap of this magnitude calls for fundamental changes in the way organizations connect people to work. To thrive in an era of disruption, leaders must clearly define the skills they need now and those they will need in the future. Companies must understand how these skills will be deployed as the nature of work evolves and find more effective ways of acquiring, developing, and retaining suitable talent. To do that, they must shift their operating models, technology choices, workforces, and cultures as they transform into agile, future-facing, skills-powered organizations.

This Strategy Guide describes why a skills-powered approach is needed, the benefits it brings, the challenges organizations commonly face in making the transition, and what a successful skills-powered organization looks like. It will explain how companies can get started and achieve measurable results while building a broader foundation for the future.

Making Skills a Top Priority

As automation and AI extend their capabilities, jobs are changing. Repetitive work is going away, while creativity and critical thinking are increasingly augmented by AI and new types of work are emerging. To keep up with this transformation of work, organizations need to understand how the skills required for work are changing: what

skills are being rendered obsolete, what new skills are required, and what skills are increasingly machine augmented.

"Technology shifts are changing jobs, automating tasks, and shortening the lifespan of skills," says Bradford Bell, the William J. Conaty Professor of Strategic Human Resources and director of the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR). "Work has become much more dynamic. Increasingly, organizations are looking at a skills-based model to help them better adapt and respond."

In a world where technology plays an increasingly greater role in operations, roles such as prompt engineers and business intelligence (BI) developers may be needed. Meanwhile, even existing jobs will require employees to use technology in new ways.

"You can't always transfer past experience to newly defined roles," says Joseph Fuller, professor of management practice and faculty cochair of the Project on Managing the Future of Work at Harvard Business School. "A maintenance worker at an internal combustion auto plant has fundamentally different duties from a maintenance worker at a battery-operated auto plant."

Warehouse managers will need people who can manage the robots increasingly used for picking and packing. Enterprises will need business managers to decide where they should deploy chatbots and who knows how to judge their effectiveness.

But despite the growing need for new abilities, organizations continue to search for talent using existing job titles and descriptions.

“Job titles don’t have the meaning they once had. It’s very clear that AI is changing the skills required, in some cases more profoundly than others,” says Thomas Kochan, George Maverick Bunker Professor Emeritus at the MIT Sloan School of Management and a faculty member and former codirector of the MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research.

“In Silicon Valley, only about 10% of founders have a degree in relevant fields like computer science. That’s good evidence that you don’t need a degree to succeed.”

PETER CAPPELLI

George W. Taylor Professor of Management, University of Pennsylvania Wharton School

That makes it difficult for employers to find the help they need. The problem deepens when they impose a college degree requirement, a barrier that drastically narrows the talent pool. Just 38% of Americans age 25 and older have a college degree or further education, according to **2022 Census Bureau data**. But that doesn’t mean they don’t have valuable skills. Nearly half (45%) of working-age Americans hold certificates or other alternative credentials, according to the **Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)**. And among the other half, 49% have considered earning them. Employees may also have leadership experience or technical skills, such as coding, that aren’t reflected in their job titles.

A skills-powered model takes a different approach to finding talent, opening the field to more candidates but targeting specific capabilities. More companies are taking this approach, and state governments are also finding ways to implement it (see “States Make Strides With Skills-Powered Hiring”).

“A skills-based organization makes hiring, promotion, and training decisions based on individuals’ demonstrated skills and competencies, rather than using proxy credentials such as a university degree,” Fuller says. “The research I’ve done has found that in most fields, people without degrees are as likely to be successful as those with them. The exceptions are in the professional and financial services industries. All the others are roughly equal.”

And, of course, degrees can’t measure important attributes such as creativity and drive.

“In Silicon Valley, only about 10% of founders have a degree in relevant fields like computer science. That’s good evidence that you don’t need a degree to succeed,” says Peter Cappelli, George W. Taylor Professor of Management and director of the Center for Human Resources at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School.

Skills-powered organizations identify current and future company needs and define the skills and attributes needed to fill them, then break job descriptions into lists of skills for each position. To enhance the list, they should also review evaluations of high-performing employees and interview them to gauge their soft skills.

“Few companies audit the performance of successful employees,” Fuller says. “They think they attracted the right people with the language they have in place, so they continue using it. But work is changing, and the population is changing. Doing the same thing and expecting good results is overly optimistic.”

As skills change, the skills lists are updated. Eventually, skills become the focus of all hiring, promotion, and training decisions, helping organizations efficiently find the talent they need.

Developing a Skills-Powered Workforce: The Benefits

When implemented correctly, a skills-based approach offers a wealth of strategic and economic benefits (see **Table 1**).

Opening opportunities to more candidates makes it easier for companies to find people with the specific capabilities they need, reducing the talent gap so many struggle to bridge.

Table 1: Benefits of a Skills-Powered Approach

For Employers	For Employees
Stronger recruiting, hiring, and retention capabilities	Greater transparency around career progression requirements
Increased workforce productivity and agility	Expanded, more democratic access to career opportunities
More effective and efficient talent development and deployment	Improved access to training for developing marketable skills
Optimization of overall labor costs	Increased workforce engagement

“There is a strategic benefit from the skills-based paradigm — it makes good business sense,” says Audrey Mickahail, senior vice president of delivery and insights for Opportunity@Work, a non-profit that advocates for workers who are “skilled through alternative routes” (STARs) rather than having bachelor’s degrees. “We hear employers talk about a talent gap, but we think a lot of that is self-inflicted. It’s not a talent gap; it’s an opportunity gap.”

Skills-powered organizations can also save money on training.

“Companies can better identify skills gaps and know where they need to invest for talent development, upskilling, and reskilling,” says Bell of Cornell. “They can allocate their training dollars to areas that have the greatest impact and ROI.”

Hiring for skills also reduces the training burden and improves retention.

“If you’re accurate in identifying skills, people become productive more quickly,” Fuller says. “And hiring people who are skilled at their jobs lowers churn. People feel better about doing work they’re good at and are less likely to quit or get fired.”

Experts also encourage organizations to develop individual employee skills profiles and an organization-wide skills inventory to facilitate internal hiring. That can save companies a bundle on recruiting and hiring expenses, which can run from three to four times the salary cost for each role being filled, according to SHRM research. It also allows companies to offer employees training and career progression, further improving job satisfaction while increasing company agility.

“Organizations know which employees might be a good fit for upcoming openings and can prepare to move them when opportunities become available,” Bell says.

When a skills-based approach is extended throughout the organization, the benefits multiply.

“Thinking through a skills-based lens allows organizations to better understand their talent gaps and develop the skills and capabilities they need,” Bell says. “By making skills the backbone of their talent practices, organizations can better allocate people to projects, help employees explore different career paths, and gain the flexibility to allocate their capital more effectively as their needs change.”

Overcoming Cultural Challenges

To become skills-powered, organizations must look at work in a new way — not as a series of boxes with job titles and budgets attached, but as an evolving set of skills that flow where they’re needed to enhance productivity while enabling employees to advance and thrive. Achieving this balance often requires cultural adjustments.

Flowing talent to work across the organization requires leaders to view talent as an enterprise resource. In environments where leaders’ performance is heavily indexed to their teams’ productivity or profitability metrics, it can be difficult to promote sharing (rather than hoarding) top talent. Creating space for team members to develop and use new skills can also be a struggle.

“Companies need to shift their mindsets to make skills the currency of the organization,” Bell says. “They need to become data-driven to

“By making skills the backbone of their talent practices, organizations can better allocate people to projects, help employees explore different career paths, and gain the flexibility to allocate their capital more effectively as their needs change.”

BRADFORD BELL

William J. Conaty Professor of Strategic Human Resources,
Cornell University ILR

understand the skills they have and project future needs. They need to build strong cultures of learning to build new skills.”

Organizations should work with stakeholders to define objectives. They should develop a road map for change and sketch out their vision of a skills-powered framework for hiring, promotions, and training without rushing to implement it. Change — especially cultural change — takes time, but organizations can start building support for a skills-powered approach by demonstrating incremental success.

“Always start with a pilot,” Cappelli advises. “Find jobs that are difficult to fill and require skills you can put your finger on.”

Document successes and failures along the way, then use your knowledge to design another pilot. Most organizations launch many trials before implementing a program companywide.

Be sure to create metrics for measuring success, which are crucial not just for improving results but also for gaining executive buy-in. It’s also important to include hiring managers and other mid-level leaders in your plans, reinforcing the link between the changes you’re making and the pain points you’re trying to address.

“There may be a perception among managers that making changes, such as removing a degree requirement, is risky,” Mickahail says. “The reality is that all hiring entails risk, but you can demonstrate how it’s possible for them to gain the attributes they need in other, more reliable ways. It’s a subtle but important shift in the conversation.”

Transforming the Talent Pipeline

In addition to hiring people with the right abilities, a skills-powered organization makes training a central part of operations.

“You need to make sure all of your skills and capabilities are updated as technologies and the organization change,” Kochan says. “Everyone in the company should have access to skills development programs. With so many systems available online, there are many options for allowing individuals to manage their training.”

Organizations need to make it clear that they expect employees to take advantage of skills-upgrading opportunities, Kochan adds. They can guide employees to the right training by correlating their existing skills with upcoming company needs.

States Make Strides With Skills-Powered Hiring

Like private companies, state governments are feeling the pinch of labor shortages. For that reason, they’re increasingly turning to the skills-based approach.

The **National Governors Association** has become a strong supporter of skills-powered hiring, which can help solve labor problems while providing opportunities for economically disadvantaged and minority residents. At least 16 states — including Colorado, Maryland, Massachusetts, Utah, Pennsylvania, and Virginia — have scratched degree requirements for many government jobs and are instead seeking candidates with relevant work experience or skills certifications.

Skills-focused nonprofit Opportunity@Work describes these workers — about 70 million Americans, according to the organization — as people who are “skilled through alternative routes,” or STARS.

“Our research has found that STARS are underrepresented in government, particularly at the state and local level,” says Audrey Mickahail, senior vice president at Opportunity@Work.

The organization partnered with Maryland’s state government to implement skills-powered hiring. After an internal review in 2022, the state removed degree requirements for about half of its 38,000 jobs.

Next, Opportunity@Work helped Maryland set up an online talent marketplace to connect STARS with job openings, launching the new platform in March 2023.

“We received over 300 inquiries from STARS wanting to learn more within the first 24 hours after the announcement,” says Bethany Bosso, Opportunity@Work’s senior director of customer experience. Since removing the degree requirements, Maryland has experienced a 41% year-over-year increase in STAR hiring.

In addition to deploying the platform, setting achievable goals and building support were keys to the state’s success.

“They took the time and care to find a coalition of the willing within the state and worked together to identify the low-hanging fruit first — jobs where they could quickly remove the degree requirement,” Mickahail says.

Communicating positive examples also helped. For example, officials made it known that the state’s chief information security officer was, in fact, a STAR.

“He was a very beloved figure, someone who was highly respected,” Mickahail says. “That really resonated with folks.” ●

Automation and AI make this much easier to do and are essential tools for implementing a skills-based framework at scale. With AI, organizations can standardize their skills taxonomy and passively infer skills from job roles, completed training, and software application usage, Bell says. AI can also update skills lists automatically, identify emerging gaps, and reveal needed training.

But while technology can be a game-changer, organizations shouldn't mistake it for a strategy. A company's workforce strategy is a living, changing set of guidelines shaped by leadership consensus and the organization's evolving needs. Only by acting as a servant to strategy can technology offer the right mix of tools to deliver each company's version of skills-powered success.

Creating a Skills-Powered Organization: One Company's Story

Creating a skills-powered framework requires time and persistence, with many trial-and-error adaptations along the way. Standard Chartered Bank illustrates how an organization can successfully implement and scale skills-based programs to achieve impressive results while saving the company money.

The bank, which is headquartered in London but does most of its business in emerging markets in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, realized it needed to change its hiring practices to accommodate technology disruption and shifting workforce demographics.

In 2020, the human resources team created a strategic workforce plan, which is updated annually. They determined that many thousands of jobs, including contact center positions, would soon become obsolete. But thousands of others — in cloud computing, data management, user experience design, and cybersecurity — would be needed. Finding the talent to fill these positions threatened to be an expensive proposition.

"We realized if we didn't take concerted actions to reskill our workforce, we would have a very big bill to contend with," says Tanuj Kapilashrami, the bank's chief strategy and talent officer. Through research conducted by the U.K.'s Financial Services Skills Commission, the organization found the potential for saving \$49,000 per job by reskilling existing employees instead of hiring outsiders.

Another strong argument for reskilling was the company's relatively young workforce. "Employees under 30 are our fastest-growing segment," Kapilashrami says.

In surveys conducted to learn how to attract and retain these workers, the bank uncovered two main trends.

"We found that people want work that is meaningful and has a positive impact," Kapilashrami says. "And there is great demand for career development and growth opportunities."

In 2021, the company launched a pilot program connecting colleagues with a team in India that wanted to make banking easier for the deaf and hearing-impaired.

"Normally for a project like that, you would ask for additional head count and resources. It would take a long time to go through budgeting and approval processes," Kapilashrami says.

Instead, the India team listed the skills needed to get the job done — data analytics, user experience design, and communications expertise — and posted them on an AI-enabled internal talent marketplace where employees anywhere could volunteer their time to help.

They did.

"A communications expert in one location said, 'This is an exciting project — I'm happy to give it a couple of hours a week,'" Kapilashrami recalls. "A UX designer in another location said, 'Sure, I can help!'"

These and other volunteers enabled the team to train 13 bank employees who communicate with hearing-impaired people in sign language. At branches where the employees aren't present, customers can connect with them through video calls.

"We get to know the skills people have beyond their job titles and gain the opportunity of redeploying them rather than hiring externally. We are seeing a very steady increase in internal hiring, and attrition has decreased."

TANUJ KAPILASHRAMI

Chief Strategy and Talent Officer, Standard Chartered Bank

The bank's talent marketplace is now implemented companywide. More than 28,000 employees have registered on the platform, and more than 2,000 have been assigned to volunteer projects ranging from improving access for people with disabilities to creating bonds for sustainability programs.

While altruism is a strong motivator for employees, it's not the only draw.

"Employees gain opportunities to upskill by designing a new product or working with clients on exciting deals. They can explore new career options," Kapilashrami says. "At most large companies, people stick to their lane, whether it's HR or marketing or sales. We are saying, 'I recognize you for your skills, and you can use them to do something completely different.'"

The bank also created eight online "future skills academies" where employees can acquire technical and management abilities to further their careers.

"We started with very targeted proof-of-concept trials for people in 'sunsetting' roles," Kapilashrami says. "Our colleagues have responded positively to these."

In 2023, 30,000 employees accessed training at one of the academies, building skills in areas such as data analytics, cybersecurity, or client advising. "The platform is AI-based, so it curates content based on what you consume and what you're interested in — a bit like Netflix," Kapilashrami explains.

Employees enrolled in a skills academy or the talent marketplace fill out a "talent passport" listing their skills and adding new ones as they're acquired. That enables the company to develop a skills inventory — an essential tool for skills-based hiring.

"We get to know the skills people have beyond their job titles and gain the opportunity of redeploying them rather than hiring externally," Kapilashrami says. "We are seeing an increase in internal hiring, and attrition has decreased."

Success with the programs has led the company to make skills-based hiring a part of some regular operations.

"In the past, hiring managers had a choice whether to hire externally," Kapilashrami says. "Now we are saying for certain types of jobs, we will only deploy talent internally."

Over time, the bank plans to further expand skills-powered hiring. Thoughtful change management has been essential to success, Kapilashrami says: "We ran many controlled experiments and collected impact data to build a business case for a skills-powered approach and gain buy-in from the board [of directors], which was absolutely critical."

Equally important, she adds, is earning the trust of what the company calls "people leaders," which includes mid- and junior-level managers.

"Every month, I invite our 14,000 people leaders to a call where we discuss many topics related to leadership and culture, including the pivot to skills," Kapilashrami says. To build the case for change, she relays success stories, sometimes inviting expert speakers.

She also listens and incorporates feedback.

"It's a very honest conversation. No topic is taboo," she says. "We are not sending top-down communications; we are co-creating a new system. People leaders want to be part of a skilled, motivated, engaged workforce. They are learning that what's better for our business is better for them."

Embracing a Skills-Powered Future

As new technologies and changing demographics disrupt organizations across the globe, finding a way to fill skills gaps has become increasingly urgent. But driving change at a large organization can become an exercise in frustration unless companies create and follow a solid plan.

Standard Chartered's experience shows that by creating a data-driven strategy, working to gain buy-in, establishing honest two-way communication, setting small-scale achievable goals, and providing useful training, organizations can create both the means and the enthusiasm to propel them to the skills-powered transformation they need. Wholesale change takes time, but by taking the right steps, organizations will constantly gain knowledge about the skills they have and the skills they need. In working to bridge these gaps, they can improve morale and save money while preparing their workers and their company to meet the demands of a fast-changing future.●

CHECKLIST:

BUILDING A SKILLS-POWERED ORGANIZATION

Experts say the following steps can help streamline your organization's transition to the skills-based approach and more quickly reap its benefits.

- [✓] **Create a framework** for your organization's transition to a skills-powered approach. Determine the objectives, define the critical success factors, gain consensus, and develop a road map for change.
- [✓] **Decide on the technology** needed to enable consistent skills insights and support talent development and deployment.
- [✓] **Develop a skills taxonomy.** Determine how you'll use it to understand the changing demand, identify available skills and related gaps, and establish development opportunities.
- [✓] **Emphasize upskilling and reskilling.** Encourage employees to make use of those opportunities to improve their skills, especially those increasing in demand or priority.
- [✓] **Identify key outcomes and desired experiences** for various stakeholders — leaders, managers, employees — at different points along the journey. Develop metrics for tracking progress and measuring success.
- [✓] **Develop a change management plan.** Create communication and feedback pathways and hold regular discussions with all stakeholders.
- [✓] **Start small.** Launch a pilot project with achievable goals to solve pressing needs. Build on success to inspire future projects.
- [✓] **Document your progress.** At each step of the journey, note which tactics work and which don't. Continue to test and improve your framework.
- [✓] **Keep expanding your efforts.** Once your framework is sound, broaden your pilots to encompass specific functional areas — for example, skills-powered hiring, skills-powered workforce planning, skills-powered training, and so on.
- [✓] **Integrate it into the business.** After demonstrated successes, make your skills-powered framework a part of your business strategy and operating model.



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SPONSOR'S VIEWPOINT

Charting the Journey to a Skills-Powered Organization

The new world of machine-augmented work requires a corresponding new operating model — one that can more accurately and quickly translate signals of emerging skills demand into workforce requirements. In other words, skills have become the currency of work.

Mercer's **research** indicates that two of every three employers are already integrating skills into career development, talent acquisition, and performance management. The degree to which these businesses dabble in versus immerse themselves in skills-first practices depends on where they are on the road to becoming skills-powered.

Many of the businesses moving to skills-powered models are doing so to drive human-centric productivity through an optimal combination of talent with AI or automation. That's not surprising, given that increasing productivity is the No. 1 reason for business transformation, according to executives surveyed for Mercer's "2024 Global Talent Trends" report. Concurrently, skills-based practices enable organizations to translate the demand for work into workforce practices that meet employees where they are. Skills growth is one of five dimensions that helps employees thrive at work (along with financial stability, psychological safety, sense of purpose, and digital enablement).

The journey to becoming a skills-powered organization has multiple facets and is predicated on a maturity curve that typically encompasses the following:

1. A foundation of robust data. Knowing what skills exist in the workforce and where the gaps are relative to emerging work demand is usually the first step for employers wishing to embrace skills-based practices. Establishing a skills foundation sets the stage for more proactive decision-making across work and workforce planning and associated talent development and deployment strategies.

2. A job architecture that leaves space for transformation. Companies striving to be future-fit regularly update their job architectures by mapping the capabilities required to perform the work while pinpointing skills gaps in the workforce. This process sets the

Forty percent of executives surveyed believe redesigning work to incorporate AI and automation will deliver substantial business growth — but to fully realize the gains, work redesign must be human-centric.

parameters for evaluating the fundamental design of each job and how it might evolve. In turn, employees get a better grasp of what skills they need and how they can progress in the organization.

3. Redesigned work. AI will render some skills obsolete while giving rise to new ones that will become increasingly machine-augmented. Forty percent of executives surveyed believe redesigning work to incorporate AI and automation will deliver substantial business growth – but to fully realize the gains, work redesign must be human-centric. In addition to reallocating tasks for AI and automation, companies redesigning work at scale are embracing different work models and talent pools to leverage agile working, job sharing, gig/freelance workers, and talent consortiums. Redesigning work requires organizations to make skills the currency of work to ensure the optimal combination of talent with AI and/or automation.

4. Increased agility through the use of talent marketplaces. Skills-powered organizations increasingly have multiple ways of engaging talent in the work. These range from traditional fixed job-based models to flexible (“flex”) models that enable employees to acquire and express their skills in different domains to flow models based on projects and gigs. Talent marketplaces are critical to powering the flex and flow models of work, yet only 26% of companies are leveraging these technologies today.

5. The end-to-end skills-powered organization. The highest level of maturity sees a business retooling and transforming every aspect of its operating and talent models to be skills-powered. Skills are the currency of work in every sense – across recruitment, performance management, assessment, reward and recognition, learning and development, career progression, and strategic workforce planning. The most effective organizations create clear links between their evolving operating models and their workforce skills. They do so by seamlessly translating evolving demand signals for work into requirements for skills, structuring developmental interventions to close skills gaps, and deploying skills to meet demand through those fixed, flex, and flow models.

Conclusion

The move to becoming a skills-powered organization necessitates a redesign of not just work but also all aspects of the architecture surrounding it. Just as jobs can be deconstructed and reconfigured in light of AI and automation, many business structures and processes need to be dismantled and rebuilt to support agility. The next-generation organization will be at the forefront of this strategic shift – cultivating a culture of talent sharing, embedding new technology to take mundane work off employees’ hands while augmenting their creativity, and reshaping the talent life cycle so the business and its people can thrive in a world demanding perpetual reinvention with skills as the currency of work.

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