

How to Find and Close Your Organization's Skill Gaps

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Skill gaps have been a common business challenge among organizations for years. There is a lot of information out there debating the existence, extent, and causes of the skills gap, but that's not going to be the focus of what you'll find here. We'll discuss causes as they may relate to your individual organization, so you can better understand how to find and fix the skill gaps you're experiencing.

In discussions of a nationwide, epidemic-esque skills gap, it becomes very easy to seek out someone to blame for creating the problem. What takes more effort but yields a much more desirable result is **taking responsibility for what you can do to fix the issues in your organization.**

Once you've figured out how to bridge your own skill gaps, you can extend what you've learned to others, creating positive changes for your community and for society at large.

So, are you ready to find and close your organization's skill gaps?



What are the factors contributing to your skill gaps?

If you're having trouble finding qualified people for specific roles, there can be many factors at play – which may or may not include skill gaps.

According to ManpowerGroup, “Nearly a third of employers say the main reason they can't fill roles is a lack of applicants.”

This could mean that the job requirements are too narrow, or possibly the role is unattractive to candidates. Burning Glass Technologies states that, "Not every worker shortage is driven by a skills gap. Roles like personal care aides and customer service representatives all have high ratios of openings to available workers. The skills involved also don't require lengthy training. The problem is that these jobs aren't that attractive, with relatively low pay and challenging working conditions."

If a lack of applicants is your main concern, then you'll want to re-evaluate how your job descriptions present the role, benefits, and company culture. Find out what people like about working in those roles and showcase those things.

What are some other factors that could be contributing to your skill gaps?

- Are your education requirements more stringent than they need to be?
- Are poorly structured interviews allowing unconscious bias to influence hiring decisions?
- Are wages too low to attract those with the "right" skills and education?
- Is your location incompatible with the local talent pool and the types of skills you're looking for?
- Do you have reluctant retirees who are unenthusiastic about learning new skills and unwilling or unable to step into retirement?
- Is pervasive drug use in your local community making it hard to find workers who can pass required drug tests?
- Are you looking for skills in candidates that have emerged too recently to be taught in many college degree programs?

Hopefully looking at those examples will help you to examine where the root causes of your skill gaps may lie, so you can better see how to address the cause instead of only the symptom.

Are your talent expectations realistic?

Whether or not educational systems are preparing students to succeed in the workforce, you need to match your recruiting expectations and talent management strategies to **the reality that learning is for life.**

For most organizations, employee training and development has focused on improving the performance of employees in current job roles. That needs to remain a key strategic objective. However, when specific jobs remain hard to fill, employee development teams can provide training to **candidates who show the ability to acquire the skills needed to perform successfully.**

Some creativity may be helpful to create partnerships with universities, community colleges, local job and employment agencies, etc., but getting involved to build your own pool of qualified candidates to interview seems like a smart investment compared to leaving key jobs unfilled for lengthy periods of time.

In many communities all over the country, there are classes and programs at vocational schools and colleges teaching coding and IT skills. Find one or two where the classes are being taught by current practitioners and established experts in your community. Build relationships with these schools and think about offering internships to students. This is a great way to meet potential employees and see their ability to learn first-hand.

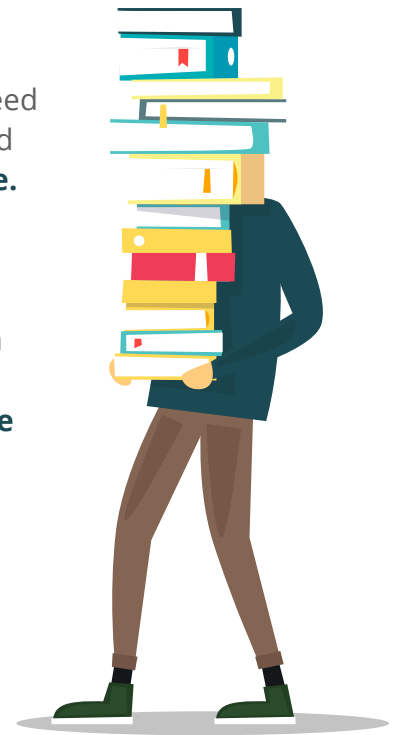
Another way to align your recruiting practices with your talent reality is to perhaps re-define what you mean by “qualified” candidates.

Rather than looking for only new hires with the perfect combination of skills, education, temperament, goals, and attitude, look for the latter three (which are much more indicative of success in a role), then train for the skills they need. Just because someone has the education and technical skills you’ve outlined, that doesn’t mean they’ll be a good match for the role or for your company.

Hire for attitude and ability to learn, then train for skills.

If your education requirements are strict, is it because they truly need to be? Or are they automatically disqualifying candidates who could be a great fit for the role? Many companies are looking for education requirements that are not even present in those who currently hold similar positions!

A study by Burning Glass Technologies found that **“37 percent of job postings for bookkeepers ask for a bachelor’s degree, compared to 19 percent of current bookkeepers who have one.”**



Rather than focusing solely on the perfect set of skills, education, and experience, make sure you're giving enough weight to a candidate's fit with company culture and attitude toward learning and performance. Your organization may need a significant and/or renewed commitment to the training and development of employees, which means **looking for people with the ability to acquire skills, rather than only looking for those with a preselected set of qualifications.**

Is your recruiting process creating the illusion of skill gaps?

There may be areas within your recruiting process where you can make some changes to help bridge the apparent gap you're seeing in skills.

One way to do this is to be very clear on which skills are must-haves for a role and which are nice-to-haves. And get brutal with that list! For instance, are advanced Excel skills absolutely necessary when starting out in the role? Or could intermediate be sufficient, if the candidate shows the capacity to learn more?

This could mean that if you're using an Applicant Tracking System, you may need to adjust some criteria for screening applicants. ATS can be helpful, but don't let them short circuit your ability to find true talent. Experts looking at the impact of ATS cite them as part of the problem with perceived skill gaps. In a 2013 Career Advisory Board survey of 500 U.S. hiring managers, Cait Murphy said, **"67 percent said they 'don't feel like they have to settle for a candidate without the perfect qualifications.'** So if they don't find the white elephant, they will keep hunting – even though there are willing elephants ready to do the job."

With interviewing, take a look at the types of assessments used and make sure they match the scenarios that employees actually work in.

Seth Robinson, Senior Director of Technology Analysis at CompTIA, offered this example in an article with HR Dive:

"In the software development space, it's very common to have a whiteboard interview — a candidate comes in and an engineer says, 'here's a problem, can you code [the solution] on a whiteboard?' This measures a candidate's coding skill and ability for quick thinking. However, in the job, an employee is more likely to develop code while sitting at a desk, in a group, with more time to think, meaning a white board interview could weed out a perfectly skilled candidate due to an unrealistic job expectation."



Skill gaps can also be perceived because unconscious bias is blocking perfectly qualified candidates from receiving an offer. Sometimes interviewers or hiring managers can confuse a “gut feeling” about someone’s character with a personal bias, **so structured interviews with multiple people are important to level the playing field for each candidate.** If you have managers who often cite a “gut feeling” for not choosing a candidate, press them to provide more detail about that feeling.

Are there other ways that your recruiting and interviewing methods may be creating an illusion of skill gaps that actually could be filled?

How can a formal assessment help?

Let’s shift gears from recruiting challenges. When skill gaps are a stumbling block within your organization, it’s important to get an accurate picture of where those gaps are so you can create a plan to fill them.

According to the “Needs Assessments: Design and Execution for Success” whitepaper by ATD, only 56 percent of organizations conduct needs assessments. But for those who do them, 68 percent said they were highly or very highly effective.

If most organizations find clear value in assessments, why don’t more do them? Well, they take effort, of course. But if that effort is going to help you stop spinning your wheels and create an effective plan to move forward, that’s worth it, wouldn’t you say?

Your first decision before conducting a formal skills assessment is whether to use in-house resources or bring in an outside evaluator. A third party can help to alleviate the time and effort needed from your staff, while also likely providing a more objective viewpoint. They may also be a great resource for helping to determine benchmarks, based on their experience working with other companies similar to yours.

If you decide to do an evaluation yourself, here are a few tips to get you started:

1. Decide whether you’ll evaluate on an individual or team level, or both.
2. Make sure to get managers on board with this process, since they will have the best idea of what skills their team members need and already have.
3. Use a well-defined rating scale that gives consistency across skill levels and the level of importance of each skill for the role.
4. Grant soft skills the weight they deserve – don’t leave them out, especially for supervisor and manager roles.
5. Don’t create a static definition of each role – think forward to what will be needed in the future, so you can start building in those skills now.

In an article with Training Magazine, Clara Lippert Glenn recommends to create fun and simple tests to assess employees on skills that have been determined necessary for their role, but “reassure employees that these tests are not done to determine one’s ability to do or keep one’s job but rather are being used to help employees map a future training path to make them the best they can be at their job.”

Once you have data in hand, you can make informed decisions about where you’ll have to hire outside talent, and where it makes more sense to fill gaps by providing training for the talent you already have.

How does modern training help fill gaps efficiently?

Your employee training program can either be a drain on resources, or it can be a power player in solving business challenges.

The determining factor is whether you approach it as fulfilling employer needs or employee needs.

When training considers the employer’s needs first, with employees as an afterthought, it fails to accomplish the range of benefits that modern learning facilitates. However, when employees are considered first, training can be a catalyst for improving every facet of the organization. Employees today expect their employer to help them improve in their role, and they place a high value on training opportunities.

82 percent of employees say lifelong learning is important, but nearly 40 percent report their employers don’t provide for upskilling opportunities.

- Randstad Workmonitor survey (Q3 2017)



There are numerous surveys and studies showing the growing need for organizations to offer learning opportunities that align with employees’ expectations, or risk losing out on top talent.

Michelle Prince, the global head of learning and development at Randstad, stated, “There are many things companies can do to help their employees upskill and prepare for jobs of the future. It is in a company’s best interest to help their people grow in their profession or into leadership roles...”

Modern training is more than a necessity of compliance requirements, and it’s more than sending senior leaders to expensive off-site seminars. It offers **development of all skills at all levels for all employees.**

So, what are the characteristics of modern training and why is it powerful for bridging skill gaps?

The most effective training programs today use a well-crafted blend of instructor-led and online training. A large learning library that provides a central location of curated, high quality content can be your biggest ally when you're targeting skill gaps.

These libraries can be used for a wide variety of topics – IT, programming, software, professionalism, leadership and management, customer service, sales, soft skills... whether it's the main method or supplemental to in-person training, having this content available online gives employees the ability to learn anytime, anywhere.

Implementing online training technology gives you great flexibility with delivering training specific to skillsets, especially if the library offers learning paths with content already curated for specific roles and skills. With this content, you gain the knowledge of verified experts but save on costly classroom training sessions.



With video-based microlearning content that includes reinforcement tools, employees engage with training and are better able to retain and apply that learning in their roles. Micro video can be used as standalone training or as a supplement to reinforce topics that need in-person sessions. **Learning content that's available on the job makes the process of closing skill gaps highly efficient and achievable.**

Are you ready to become a learning organization?

If your goal is to bridge skill gaps in the short term AND stay ahead of them in the future, then your training strategies need to embody learning agility and adaptability.

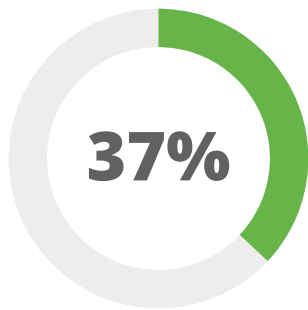
Learning agility is your secret weapon. It's the ability to learn effectively from past experiences and apply those lessons to new situations, and it's a competency that's emerging as critically important for employees of forward thinking organizations.

When you offer opportunities for employees to take charge of their learning and development, the effort to bridge skill gaps will be less like constructing the Golden Gate and more like laying a few stepping stones.

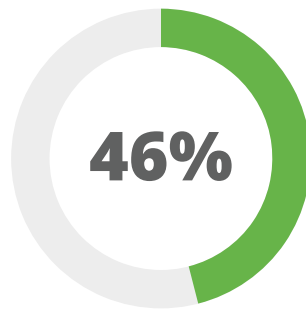
[When] it comes to learning, the organization's role is to create the environment and systems to allow employees to constantly learn and relearn.

– Deloitte, 2017 Global Human Capital Trends

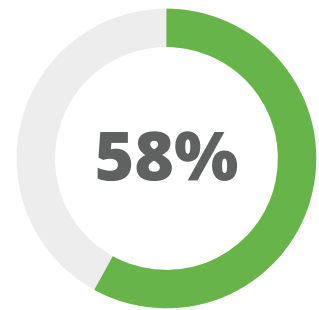
Investing in and promoting continual learning for employees at all levels is your strongest tactic for both filling and preventing skill gaps, and the business benefits to having a learning culture are clear. According to Bersin by Deloitte, learning organizations are:



more productive



more likely to be first to market



more prepared for future demands

With modern training methods and technology, your organization can shift from struggling with skill gaps to staying ahead of the learning curve. That's how you become an industry leader to be reckoned with.

Recommended Resources



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