Getting Your Employees Ready for Work in the Age of AI

Most employees are ready to do what they need to do. Will companies step up?

Eva Sage-Gavin
Madhu Vazirani
Francis Hintermann

Getting Your Employees Ready for Work in the Age of AI

EVA SAGE-GAVIN, MADHU VAZIRANI, AND FRANCIS HINTERMANN

Most employees are ready to do what they need to do. Will companies step up?

The era of AI is upending work as we know it. And as companies start using intelligent technologies in earnest, many people who have been well-trained for their positions for a long time may suddenly find themselves in uncharted waters.

The good news is that employees are ready to embrace the changes they see coming. According to an Accenture survey on the future workforce, over 60% of workers have a positive view of the impact of AI on their work. And

two-thirds acknowledge that they must develop their *own* skills to work with intelligent machines.

Large companies, however, are not on the same page as their employees. For one thing, business leaders believe that only about one-quarter of their workforce is prepared for AI adoption. Yet only 3% of business leaders are planning significant increases in their training budgets to meet the skills challenge posed by AI.

How can companies and employees find common ground when it comes to skill development and investment in AI capabilities? To start, senior executives should seek clarity around capability gaps and determine *which* skills their people need. From there, leaders should take an approach that advances those skills for human-AI collaboration.

Understanding the Missing Middle

Much of the press around AI has focused on automation and what it will mean for jobs. While these predictions often run the gamut of completely devastating to highly positive, continued progress in technology has stoked fears in people that AI may someday make their jobs obsolete.

However, much of the leading data around jobs suggests humans will continue to play a major role in the AI workforce — though, a transformed one. Using the U.S. Department of Labor's O*Net database, we analyzed more than 100 abilities, skills, tasks, and working styles in the United States over the past decade and found a sharp rise in the importance of creativity, complex reasoning, and social and emotional intelligence — the uniquely human skills — in many jobs.

Employees will need to apply these skills when using the array of new technologies now appearing in the workplace. They will also need to learn how to use AI to augment those skills — to make the "human + machine" interaction add up to more than the sum of its parts. We call this interaction *the missing middle* because companies often focus entirely on the ends — on what people can do without AI-powered machines or on how machines can automate work previously done by people. But the greatest value comes from the two working together.

This new era of AI calls for a new approach in business. First, both companies and employees must show that they are mutually ready to adapt to a world of work built around people and intelligent machines; identifying new tasks and skills needed to perform them is critical. Second, educators and learners both within companies and in other institutions must embrace science and smart technologies to speed up learning, stretch thinking, and tap latent intelligences. And third, employers and workers must create and maximize the motivation to learn and adapt over their lifetimes.

Establish Mutual Readiness

Companies should commit to long-term investments in workforce skills development, while employees should start adapting their skills for an AI-enabled environment. However, this readiness to change is feasible within an organization only when both company and worker have opportunities to realize their common aspirations in the new workplace. One key to achieving this: Identify new tasks and the skills needed to perform them. Then map the company's existing internal capabilities to new roles, and identify where training and new skills will be necessary.

PlainsCapital Bank, one of the largest independent banks in Texas, reimagined the nature of the work its people were doing. After it introduced digital banking services, demand for human bank tellers started to decrease. The company then combined the tasks of onsite teller, adviser, and customer service agent, creating the role of *universal banker*. Bringing these disparate roles into one was not a simple change. The requirements for success in the new role include excellent interpersonal skills, strong problem-solving abilities, and creativity, in addition to knowledge of the products and the customer experience.

To fill these new jobs, the bank changed the selection process to behavioral-based interviewing, based on the belief that how someone has acted in past situations can be a predictor of future performance. Today, when PlainsCapital finds a good match from a pool of internal candidates and identifies where they need skills development, the organization provides the relevant training, whether in technical skills, socio-emotional skills, or both.

Accelerate Ability

Adapting to AI is not just a matter of more training. It's also about *new* training. How new? Consider what neuroscience tells us.

Neuroscience is providing evidence that both cognitive and noncognitive skills can be taught to people of any age. Brain plasticity shows that under the right learning conditions, the adult brain can restructure itself in remarkable ways. Companies need to take this evidence to heart to stay nimble in the age of AI.

Companies will increasingly need employees to collaborate effectively with coworkers from different disciplines. Mental-training approaches such as *mindfulness* — teaching people to be aware in the moment — are not traditionally part of corporate training. But they have proven effects in strengthening employee performance. For example, employees who took part in Accenture's mindfulness program (designed with Potential Project reported notable improvements in their ability to focus, set priorities, and collaborate within teams.

Another way to accelerate ability within organizations includes using virtual training. Instead of having to go to a classroom, an employee can learn online from wherever is convenient for them, on their own schedule. AI-based adaptive-learning systems guide employees through computer-based courses, monitoring their progress, personalizing lessons, coaching, and providing feedback.

Education companies are bringing the best of AI and neuroscience to corporate learning and development. Startups like the Silicon Valley-based Socos Labs, the Lausanne, Switzerland-based Coorpacademy, and the

Paris-based InsideBoard offer adaptive learning experiences using AI algorithms and scientific principles. Accenture's Future Talent Platform uses virtual reality and augmented reality to simulate real-world situations in training; employees make decisions given the information they see and then receive feedback in real time to develop their socio-emotional skills.

People often learn best from each other. At Google, workers learn new skills on the job. Some 80% of all tracked training at Google is now done through the g2g (Googler-to-Googler) voluntary network of 6,000+ employees. Companies may also encourage skill-building through "outside in" talent exchanges with startups, universities, NGOs, and the public sector.

Solidify Shared Values

What values matter most in the evolving world of AI and humans at work? At the highest level, it's about sharing the commitment to education amid rapid change. People need time to adapt and prepare for new forms of work, and companies must recognize individual needs. Employees need the freedom to pursue skills development that is aligned to their passion and purpose at work; companies should subsidize training programs with external stakeholders. Success in the future of work means adaptability to constant change, and therefore lifelong learning is crucial for workers.

Lifelong learning can open doors to new careers at any stage. Accenture has been using what it calls the Future Talent Platform to train more than 165,000 people globally in the latest digital technologies for the past two years. Users can explore more than 3,500 learning boards curated by emerging technology experts within the company and from its partners to develop skills in critical

areas such as digital, cloud, security, and artificial intelligence.

Similarly, Salesforce's learning platform, Trailhead, helps employees acquire the skills they need to change roles. For instance, some have learned how to code on Trailhead and then moved from job recruiting or sales into engineering roles. By earning and displaying badges of achievement, employees showcase their transferrable skills; Salesforce benefits by keeping its large staff up to date on the latest technical skills.

A Public Matter

Embracing new technology requires a continual reimagining of work and ongoing skills development. Meeting the demand for skills training may require more resources than a company can muster. Here, public-private partnerships can and should be brought to bear to great effect.

Singapore is offering individual learning accounts to address the need for training. Any citizen over 25 can get a tax credit for taking training from any of 500 approved providers. In 2017, more than 285,000 Singaporeans used the credit. And in the United States, the Aspen Institute Future of Work Initiative has proposed tax-advantaged Lifelong Learning and Training Accounts, which would be jointly funded by employers, employees, and government.

Our research has found that nearly half of employees believe their ability to develop new skills is impeded by lack of time and sponsorship for training from their employers. It's time to show them their company has their back.

About the Authors

Eva Sage-Gavin leads the Talent & Organization practice for Accenture.

Madhu Vazirani (@madhu_vazirani) is a director with Accenture Research. Francis Hintermann (@francishinterma) leads Accenture Research.

MITSloan
Management Review

PDFs ■ Reprints ■ Permission to Copy ■ Back Issues

Articles published in MIT Sloan Management Review are copyrighted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology unless otherwise specified at the end of an article.

MIT Sloan Management Review articles, permissions, and back issues can be purchased on our website: sloanreview.mit.edu or you may order through our Business Service Center (9 a.m.-5 p.m. ET) at the phone numbers listed below. Paper reprints are available in quantities of 250 or more.

Reproducing or transmitting one or more MIT Sloan Management Review articles by electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying or archiving in any information storage or retrieval system) **requires written permission.**

To request permission, use our website: sloanreview.mit.edu
or
Email: smr-help@mit.edu
Call (US and International):617-253-7170 Fax: 617-258-9739

Posting of full-text SMR articles on publicly accessible internet sites is prohibited. To obtain permission to post articles on secure and/or password-protected intranet sites, email your request to smr-help@mit.edu.