



LESSONS LEARNED:

Government tech skill development

The pandemic has accelerated digital transformation while highlighting areas with room for improvement, such as workforce equity, skills gaps and resource development. Government organizations, in particular, must continue to push toward greater digital fluency by creating cultures of continuous learning, engagement and improvement. By tapping into proven strategies for government workforce transformation, organizations can respond to today's disruptions to excel in tomorrow's new normal.

Addressing the skills gap to prepare for future threats and opportunities

As we adapt our workplaces to equitably reflect the needs and experiences of employees, we must also prepare our workforce for emerging threats and opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the growing tech skills gap, but the issue predates 2020. In recent years, workers have found themselves displaced by emerging technologies, automation and offshore labor. Professional workers can no longer rely on degrees alone but must also demonstrate technical competencies and digital fluency in the hiring process. At the same time, employers struggle to find the skills they need, with 74 percent of hiring managers noting a skills gap in the current labor market.

The labor market is changing in the public sector as much as in the private sector, and skills requirements are changing to reflect government agencies' current and emerging demands. To meet these demands, many organizations are leaning on reskilling and upskilling strategies. For example, the 2020 federal budget proposal included resources to reskill 20 percent of its workforce in data science, IT and cybersecurity. The Biden administration's 2022 budget proposal includes provisions for employees in technology and cybersecurity who want to improve their skills.

From the federal to the local level, government organizations will need to adapt to a changing employee experience, the need for greater digital acumen and market uncertainty as we move into a post-pandemic world. We can look to how the United States' largest bureaucracy, the Department of Defense, drives workforce innovation for inspiration.

Lauren Knausenberger, Deputy CIO for the Air Force, highlights the importance of owning competitive competencies with internal skills and leadership support: "We have to have the internal competency to feel that we do own our technical baseline. We have to own the tech stack, at least on things like our nuclear programs and our air platforms, those things that we consider to be our core components of competitive advantage. We have to have ownership...We need to be accountable and have the skills and the leaders that really get it."

Focusing on those core competencies and the technical skills required to own them leaves room to consider ways to achieve greater efficiency. When employees are deeply embedded in the strategic environment, they can look for ways to adapt and respond to rapidly-changing situations. In many cases, this may involve uncovering opportunities for automation and innovative workflows.

Major General Kimberly Crider of Space Force explains, "In order to unleash high levels of creativity and really harness it to the benefit of all of our missions and business functions, we need every single member of our department to have access to the skills and the environment where they can develop those skills, be able to train, learn and apply those skills in a realistic environment and make that part of their everyday work."



Skill development: Assess, lead, build and refine

The World Economic Forum projects that 54 percent of employees will require significant reskilling and upskilling to adapt to the changing workplace. The need to reskill affects nearly every industry. However, government agencies have the additional burden of carefully managing every taxpayer dollar. A reskilling/upskilling initiative needs support from the top down to achieve a favorable return on investment.

In other words, leadership needs to lead not only the charge but also the change. Skill development has operated on the sidelines in the past, and relegating skill development to merely a departmental or team effort is an antiquated operation. Instead, executives must push the effort to the forefront of their organizations. They must connect the effort to organizational objectives and demonstrate a commitment to development. In some instances, hiring a technology skills director or executive may be valuable to champion the cause and ensure alignment with organization-wide goals.

CREATE A CULTURAL COMMITMENT

Leadership buy-in is also key to creating a cultural commitment to skill development. If the program only appears to be a fringe effort, employees will deprioritize their involvement. Instead, employees should feel encouraged to embrace learning and development opportunities when skill development is part of the company culture—the mindset shifts from a “nice-to-have” opportunity to an absolute for organizational success.

Look for ways to bring in non-positional leaders from all areas of the organization. Whether individual contributors or directors, technology skills enthusiasts are critical in motivating their peers and moving the efforts from a plan to present reality. These early adopters can help drive meaningful change by encouraging emotional commitment to the initiative. Kimberly Loving, Chief of Staff at the City of Seattle IT, shares the importance of these internal champions: “When folks across the organization see nonpositional leaders developed and helping to develop them, that’s a win across the organization.”

It’s much easier and more effective to progress your goals when everyone is clear on what those goals are and why they matter. This is when having a shared vision for your learning and development programs comes in handy.

DETERMINE SKILL LEVELS AND IDENTIFY GAPS

After securing leadership buy-in and embedding skill development in the organizational culture, take stock of your team’s skills and identify the gaps.

Skills indexing generally takes the following approach:

- **Plan:** Determine the timeline for skills indexing and stakeholders and whether you’re indexing at the individual, department or organizational level
- **Identify:** Pinpoint which skills matter to the organization’s mission both now and in the future
- **Organize:** Create a taxonomy of these competencies
- **Prioritize:** Assign priority to each competency based on need
- **Measure:** Use employee surveys, interviews, feedback and skills management technology to benchmark current skills levels
- **Act:** Train and hire for skills based on organizational goals. Provide opportunities for employees to use and reinforce their competencies.
- **Assess:** Based on your timeline, re-measure competencies and incorporate feedback from employees into continuing efforts

When reviewing learning and training platforms, prioritize systems that provide a sense of structure. “We want high-level quality of instruction. We want employees to have access to that,” shares Roger Miller from the FBI Terrorist Screening Center in regards to what the organization looks for in learning platforms. “What we’re seeing is that when we provide them structured formats, they walk in on day one knowing where to go.”

While building your roadmap for workforce transformation, make sure to keep employees informed. Your team should understand what skills are needed, why they’re essential and how to learn these skills. Skill development opportunities should be not only provided but also prioritized during the workday. This way, employees view upskilling as doable.

For example, the Department of Defense emphasizes the importance of digital fluency by providing access to online learning platforms to all of its members. The FBI Terrorist Screening Center allots time during the workday for skills development and measures supervisor performance on their review and coaching of employees on this initiative.

You may also find you need to properly pace skills development opportunities. Depending on the competency, employees may want to practice skills regularly for short periods, or they might prefer to devote large chunks of time to practice less frequently. Employee feedback is a critical component of skill development. Be ready to hear what’s working, what’s not and ideas for improvement.

Feedback should be gathered from every employee level and organizational department. After all, technical skills are no longer critical for IT professionals alone. Employees in all departments need a certain level of digital acumen to collaborate, lead and work effectively. The most successful organizations will adapt to emerging technological disruptions by training, developing and equipping their employees with the tools they need to succeed in the new normal.

Keep employees engaged and connected

Workforce transformation is about more than providing processes, plans and tools; it’s about creating an engaging employee experience centered around a sense of purpose. Employees want to know their work is valued and their experience matters. Beyond that, they want to know the human experience matters, that their organizations are tapped into social causes and working to improve the world they live and work in.

It’s essential to create an equitable environment centered on psychological safety. In the past, many workforce transformation efforts focused on equality and not equity. Equity takes equality a step further by considering individual needs and experiences. Psychological safety factors into an equitable workplace because it fosters open dialogue around employees’ core issues (e.g., mental health, social justice,

racism). Leaders can build a sense of psychological safety; they must be willing to listen, take feedback and embrace different perspectives.

Equity, inclusion, social justice and environmental matters aren’t just topics that affect employees outside of work. To encourage employees to bring their whole selves to work, employers must create safe spaces for discussion and fellowship.

Loving shares how her organization is building safe spaces: “We’re starting to have some conversations, just as human beings, about how some of the current climate and the racial climate of unrest is impacting us as individuals throughout the organization. There are 700 people in the IT department. It’s about creating a safe space to address what that feels like and how to work through not only the impacts of COVID but also what society is experiencing as a whole.”

It's essential to place the onerous of building such an environment on leadership rather than employees. Employees are acutely aware that sharing personal information opens them up to potential bias. Managers can lead the way by:

- Setting the stage by addressing the nature of your work and emphasizing the value of input
- Asking questions and communicating appreciation for responses
- Prioritizing authentic engagement with employees
- Admitting and learning from mistakes
- Establish and maintain rules of confidentiality

Sources:

How to Provide Seamless Citizen Services –
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While establishing psychological safety in the workplace is a complex, long-term undertaking, its value extends to the entire organization. "We know that companies that have diverse workforces tend to produce better products because they can think about all of the customers and provide perspectives that we may sometimes miss," emphasizes Tanya Hannah, CIO, King County, Washington.

It's crucial that government workforces are able to not only overcome the unique disruptions of today, but also to adapt when uncertainty strikes in the future. A culture of continuous learning founded on customized and purposeful skill development, along with a safe and engaging environment, transform workforces into agile teams capable of adopting new skills and building the solutions necessary to thrive in whatever new normals may come.

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