7 Steps to Upskill Your Workforce for the AI Era

Insights

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How prepared is your workforce for the ongoing AI revolution? It's not about replacing humans with robots – it's about reshaping the roles of your employees. As Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum Klaus Schwab recently said, "In the new world, it's not the big fish which eats the small fish, it's the fast fish which eats the slow fish." Your existing workforce will need to learn new skills to perform the job functions that will predominate over the five years. But what skills should be prized? And how should you carry out your mission? Here are seven steps to get the job done.

AI is Truly Transformational – and The Transformation is Happening Now

This isn't the stuff of the far-off future. The World Economic Forum predicts that AI and other similar technologies will disrupt 85 million jobs around the world over the next five years alone – while creating 97 million new jobs. It also predicts that 44% of workers' skills will be disrupted in the next five years because of new tech. The time to begin your work in upskilling your workforce is now.

What Are the Surprising Non-Technical Skills That Will Be Valued?

Before you rush out and identify STEM-specific lessons for your employees, recognize that there are plenty of non-technical skills that will be of critical importance as we navigate the AI revolution. Instead of simply signing your workers up for the first "AI" class you find through a quick google search, make sure your workforce has (or is committed to learning) these foundational skills:

- **Executive Functioning**
  In the AI era, executive functioning – encompassing cognitive processes like planning, time management, organization, prioritization, and task initiation – becomes crucial. As automation takes over routine tasks, workers with pronounced executive skills will excel by strategically allocating cognitive resources, swiftly pivoting between complex tasks, and efficiently sifting through AI-generated data.

- **Strategic Thinking**
  Similarly, as AI takes over mundane processing tasks, employees can focus their time on problem-solving, creative thinking, and innovation. If you can provide your workers with the opportunity to strategize from a big-picture perspective, you will benefit in innumerable ways.

- **Analytical Skills**
  The ability to process and analyze information will remain highly prized given the many ways you will be able to crunch and look at data points using AI technology. Moreover, there are countless AI tools at your workers' disposal and the number is growing daily – you will need strong analytic skills to sift through the options and choose the right ones for the task at hand.

- **Emotional Intelligence**
  Although it may seem counterintuitive, people skills will remain highly prized throughout the AI revolution. Collaboration and communication will continue to be sought-after and important skills. Meanwhile, recognizing, understanding, and managing your own emotions – as well as recognizing, understanding, and influencing the emotions of others – will also remain crucial in the AI era, especially in managing human-machine interactions. For example, if an AI-driven analytics tool delivers bad news, an emotionally intelligent manager would better understand how to communicate this to the team in a constructive manner. Similarly, when designing or training AI systems, emotionally intelligent developers or trainers might better predict and mitigate negative emotional impacts on users.

- **Adaptability and Resiliency**
  The pace of change can feel staggering at times, and this doesn't appear to be slowing down anytime in the near future. It would therefore benefit your organization to ensure your workers display adaptability and resiliency through change. A globally recognized concept that encapsulates the challenges of our era is "VUCA," an acronym that stands for:

  - **Volatility**: The nature and speed of change, and the nature and speed of change that disrupts it.

  - **Uncertainty**: The lack of predictability in upcoming events.

  - **Complexity**: The multiple forces and factors we must operate in, often causing confusion.

  - **Ambiguity**: The lack of clarity about the meaning of an event.

Recognizing this reality, you should train your workers to:

- Counter Volatility with **Vision**: Having a clear sense of long-term direction even amidst short-term disruption.

- Meet Uncertainty with **Understanding**: A comprehensive understanding of the context in which changes occur.

- React to Complexity with **Clarity**: Simplifying complex scenarios and ensuring everyone is on the same page.

- Fight Ambiguity with **Agility**: The ability to move quickly and make decisions with flexibility in ambiguous situations.

Fortunately, a plethora of resources are available online to help you develop these essential VUCA skills tailored to the specific needs you identify in your workforce.

- **Training and Development**
  With each shortcut that AI affords, employees who would otherwise have performed those tasks could miss out on some valuable real-world experience of learning and performing those functions. Workplaces will need to ramp up their training and development programs to provide effective, alternative means to build a well-rounded, experienced workforce.

AI-Specific Skills

As IBM said in <u>a recent report</u>: "AI won't replace people – but people who use AI will replace people who don't." So what are the specific skills related to artificial intelligence you should consider for your workforce?

- **Basic Algorithm Understanding**: Equip your workforce with a basic understanding of how algorithms function. They don't need to learn how to code – but grasping the logic can aid in better integration with AI tools.

- **Data Literacy**: The AI era is data-driven. Understanding data sources, quality, and biases can help your employees make informed decisions using AI outputs.

- **Ethical Implications of AI**: Recognize the moral and societal implications of AI outputs. An understanding of ethics can guide decision-making when AI provides potentially controversial – or even discriminatory – results that run counter to your organization's commitment to diversity.

- **AI Tool Familiarity**: Introduce your team to popular AI platforms and tools, emphasizing those tailored to your industry. This ensures they can effectively use and interface with AI solutions.

- **AI Security and Compliance**: As AI becomes integrated into businesses, understanding potential security risks and ensuring compliance with regulations (especially those related to data privacy and confidentiality) will be pivotal.

- **Automation Understanding**: Provide your team with knowledge about what tasks can be automated, the benefits, and the potential pitfalls.

- **Model Training Basics**: A rudimentary understanding of how AI models are trained can aid in their effective use and troubleshooting.

- **Neural Networks and Deep Learning**: While not everyone needs to be an expert, a foundational knowledge of these root concepts can be beneficial for those working closely with AI products.

- **Natural Language Processing (NLP)**: Given the rise of chatbots and voice assistants, understanding NLP can be crucial for businesses interfacing directly with customers through AI.

- **AI Integration in Business Processes**: Equip teams with the skills to identify where AI can be integrated into current workflows to maximize efficiency.

How to Upskill: A 7-Step Program

1. Using the information above, your first step is focusing on your own specific organization and **determining where the skills shortages exist**. Don't just focus on the ones that you believe can only be solved by hiring additional employees. Instead, broaden your thinking to encompass how your existing workforce can fill the open gaps.

2. Next, take an **inventory on the kinds of training and development programs you have in place** related to the areas where skills shortages exist.

3. **Survey your workforce** about their comfort levels related to the resources you have available to them in the areas of focus, especially those that are technology related. Very often, employees feel intimidated and do not want to admit that they don't understand how to operate programs or tech, and your problems can be addressed by offering additional training.

4. **Identify courses, lectures, and trainings** (either in person or online, either taught by your own experts or third parties) in the targeted areas and in bite-sized fragments over the course of several weeks or months, one hour (or less) at a time. Tailor these training sessions to be appropriate for your audience – in form, language, method, and level of interactivity.

5. Ensure your offerings are brief but **consistently held**. It is easier to create a habit by providing sustained activities – even if each session is brief in nature – than providing inconsistent and unreliable services. Consider only preparing 45 minutes of material per session, leaving plenty of room for overrun or questions. Most individuals lose the ability to concentrate and retain new information around the 45-minute mark, and your workers will appreciate the brevity and efficiency around shorter meetings.

6. **Measure the effectiveness** of the training sessions through testing, surveying, polling, or other analytical means. Evaluate whether you need to re-offer training sessions for employees who "fail" portions of the training.

7. Develop **"micro-credentials"** that you award workers who attain a certain level of proficiency or attend a set number of trainings. Many workers are motivated by the gamification aspect of reaching a goal and getting a reward, and the credential can be added to their resume or LinkedIn profile to make them feel even more activated in that field.

A few final notes:

- Ensure that participants are appropriately compensated for their time spent in upskilling programs, whether they attend during regular working hours or outside of them. If you have questions about your wage and hour responsibilities, check with your lawyer.

- While you can use upskilling as an opportunity to identify those employees who are low performers or not adaptable to change, don't enter into the process with an eye towards weeding out workers. The emphasis should be on building up workers and not putting them on the chopping block. Your existing workers could view the process with less enthusiasm if they perceive it's actually a test of their position's viability.

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Conclusion

If you have questions, contact your Fisher Phillips attorney, the authors of this Insight, or any attorney in our Artificial Intelligence Practice Group. Make sure you subscribe to Fisher Phillips' Insight System to gather the most up-to-date information on AI and the workplace.

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