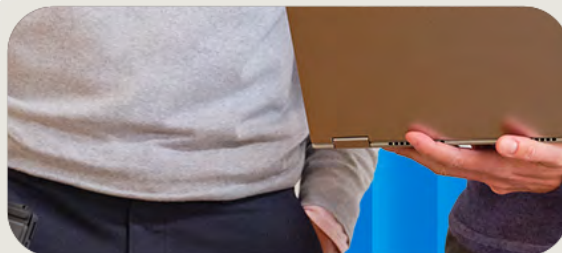


Create an AI Learning Culture:

Five considerations to empower teams with AI skills



As a leader, you're responsible for translating business priorities into results through the power of your teams. But what happens when those priorities change or critical new initiatives emerge?

You face skills gaps that can hamper progress—and you're not alone. A recent IDC report warns that “by 2026, more than 90% of global organizations will grapple with skills shortages, costing up to \$5.5 trillion USD in product delays, quality problems, impaired competitiveness, and lost revenue.”¹

As AI rapidly reshapes industries, the need to build AI fluency across your workforce becomes even more urgent. Between limited resources and existing business priorities, assembling teams with the right capabilities is a challenge. Since hiring alone can't close the gap, leaders should also invest in upskilling current employees—especially in AI and digital competencies. This approach is often faster, more cost-effective, and more sustainable. A culture of continuous learning empowers your workforce and strengthens your organization's adaptability.

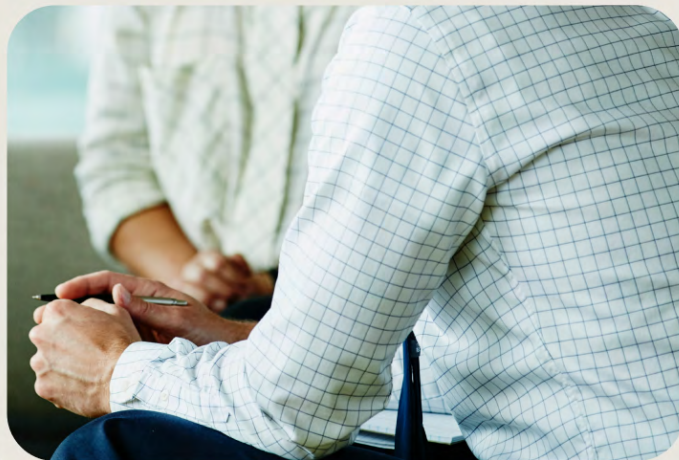
Whether through hiring, training, or both, a skills-first strategy—aligned to business goals and future needs—can unlock real value. As IDC notes, “While the skills shortage poses risks, it can also drive transformative changes, resulting in more agile and capable workforces.”²

¹ IDC Spotlight, sponsored by Microsoft, [Enterprise Resilience: Evolving Skills for Emerging Technologies](#), doc #US53169225, February 2025

² Ibid.

In this e-book, we discuss the challenges that leaders often face when they need to rapidly build teams' skills—like in this AI economy, and we offer practical tips for overcoming those challenges. Recognizing roadblocks and planning how to overcome them can help strengthen your approach and open doors to the future.

Throughout, we maintain a skills-first focus. Supporting your teams' growth and aligning competencies to your business goals with this mindset can help broaden the expertise of all employees and foster an organization-wide learning culture—a win-win for team members and the business alike.



Challenges to effective training

When you help your team members sharpen their skills or gain new ones, you demonstrate that you care about their success. However, many leaders struggle to balance training with other priorities and lack cohesive organizational support.

88%

"88% of organizations are concerned about employee retention. Providing learning opportunities is the No.1 retention strategy."³

³ LinkedIn Learning. [Workplace Learning Report 2025: The Rise of Career Champions](#). 2025.

Some common challenges that leaders face when planning for their teams' growth and development include:

Uncertainty in prioritizing skill gaps

It's hard to know which capabilities will be required for a new project or priority if there are aspects you haven't encountered before.

Organizational training that's behind the curve

Even robust learning and development (L&D) departments tend to emphasize well-established skill sets. Your teams may need to learn innovative or emerging skills to tackle new projects and priorities.

Lack of time and resources

There's no getting around existing priorities and budgets. Finding the right balance of efficiency, effectiveness, and cost is essential to addressing skill gaps.

Misaligned incentives

Team members' priorities and career paths play a key role in maintaining momentum throughout the skill-building journey.

Resistance to change

Some team members may resist upskilling efforts due to a fear of new technologies or processes or a lack of understanding of the benefits of upskilling. Colleagues with the required capabilities can help ease the learning curve for others.

Let's explore five key considerations, which, when combined with a skills-first focus, can help you address these challenges and empower your teams. By identifying and prioritizing skills gaps, filling needs in your training programs, freeing up resources for building skills, aligning employee motivations, and fostering a learning culture, you can help your teams deliver outstanding value—meeting the challenges of changing priorities and an ever-evolving technology landscape.

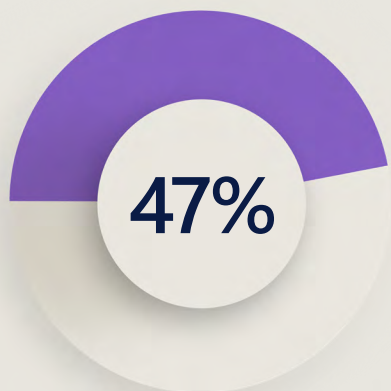
"91% of L&D pros agree continuous learning is more important than ever for career success."⁴

⁴LinkedIn Learning, *Workplace Learning Report 2025: The Rise of Career Champions*, 2025.



1. Map the road to proficiency

Efficiently identify and prioritize skills gaps



"47% of leaders list upskilling existing employees as a top workforce strategy for the next 12–18 months."⁵

If you've decided to explore training initiatives to address new projects or priorities, the first step is to figure out the gap between your teams' skills today and what they'll need to succeed tomorrow.

Determine which abilities your team members have, along with their experience in applying them. Then, in light of your business goals, define the gap.

It's also important to maintain that skills-first mindset when looking to build and train your teams. Rather than requiring team members to have specific degrees or job titles, focus on identifying those who have validated the needed skills to help bridge this gap and to bolster your teams for future projects.

Build on what you have

This is a great time to inventory your team's existing skills—including those you might not know about. Inquire about experience, hobbies, or interests relevant to the project. These can form a solid foundation for growth.

Ask people who have done it before

It's not always apparent from the outset of a project which experience will be essential to deliver results at the end. Ask people who have done this task before. If others in your organization, industry, or network have done similar work, talk to them about which capabilities made the most significant difference.

Define the gap

Having reviewed your team members' current skills and past experience, in addition to the validated abilities of your new hires, define the gap at hand.



2. Strengthen teams for the future

Fill in gaps in organizational training programs



30%

"30% of organizations indicate a lack of specialized AI skills in-house, and 26% say they lack employees with the skills needed to learn and work with AI."⁶

Now that you know which skills are key, your organization's L&D department would be the logical place to look.

Organizational training programs often focus on well-established technologies and may not be specific enough for your project needs. Fortunately, there are many other resources to consider when embarking on a skills transformation path with your teams.



Look for internal expertise

Even if it doesn't have formal programs available, your L&D department might have ideas for where to start and how to succeed. You can also find colleagues, members of other teams, or new hires with specific experience who might be willing to do lunch-and-learns or otherwise share their expertise.

Get creative

Vendors of technology used in the project, including open-source foundations, often have free resources, such as webinars or documentation, that can help your teams build the necessary skills. For example, [Microsoft Learn](#) has a wealth of technical training resources and offerings at no cost, including on-demand self-paced options, learning paths, course videos, and more.

Ask the community

Most business groups and technologies have communities full of people who are excited to share what they know. Vendors and professional associations often host such communities. Some, like [Microsoft Q&A](#) on Microsoft Learn, are dedicated to asking and answering technology questions. LinkedIn groups are also great places to look for connections.

3. Solve the time and budget puzzle

Free up resources for building skills

53%

Productivity must increase

80%

Lack time or energy

“53% of leaders say productivity must increase, but 80% of the global workforce—both employees and leaders—say they’re lacking enough time or energy to do their work.”⁷

⁷ 2025 Work Trend Index: The Year the Frontier Firm Is Born, by LinkedIn and Microsoft.

One of the most prominent challenges you could face when upskilling or reskilling your team is balancing the need for new skills with the time and resources available. You probably won't have the luxury of pausing existing projects while people get trained.



Prioritize the most impactful skills

Any gap analysis should include prioritization. Invest time and energy into the skills that matter most for results rather than trying to address every possible gap. Periodically revisit priorities to make sure that they remain aligned with business outcomes.

Use what you have

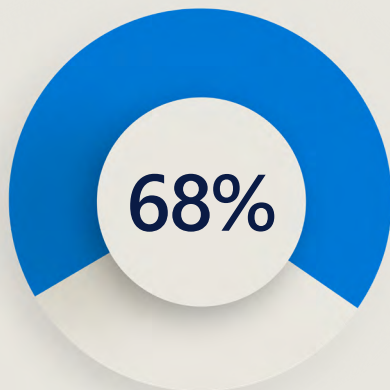
Look for resources within your organization, such as internal training programs. Additionally, team members could shadow a subject matter expert to learn the fundamentals. Check out the [Microsoft Learn for Organizations Playbook](#)—a step-by-step guide to help you identify and address skill gaps, create effective skilling plans, foster collaboration, and track progress to ensure you're celebrating success along the way.

Build a business case

One way to get funding and time for training is to demonstrate return on investment (ROI). Have a plan that shows how much investment you need and how it will contribute to results. If you prove that skill-building can support business goals, you can likely justify the cost.

4. Reduce friction

Align employee motivations



"68% of employees agree that learning helps them adapt during times of change"⁸

A skills-first approach: Your business goals and aspirations define the skills and competencies that your teams need, leading to skill-building for every role in the organization.



Connect skills development to career paths

When skills development is framed as a way not only to build expertise but also to advance their careers, employees are more likely to be motivated to engage in training opportunities. Encourage employees to identify their career goals and demonstrate how upskilling can help them achieve these goals.

Reward and recognize

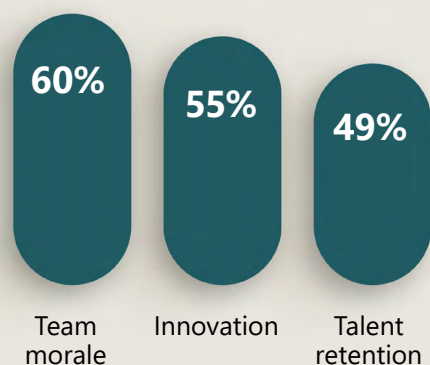
Offering rewards and recognition for growth and development achievements can help motivate employees to participate in these programs. You can also empower them to lead others and share their expertise with the team.

Align training with your organization's mission

Communicate how building skills can help the organization achieve its mission, and show how it will benefit the entire team. Doing so can improve employee motivation and engagement.

5. Build on success

Foster a learning culture



“Upskilling boosts team morale (60%), enhances innovation (55%), and improves talent retention (49%).”⁹

⁹ LinkedIn Learning, [Workplace Learning Report 2025: The Rise of Career Champions](#), 2025

At Microsoft, we encourage an organization-wide learning culture, and we support collaborative, flexible learning. With our skills-first focus, team members throughout the company, regardless of degree or job title, can build the expertise to help bridge the gaps. We provide dedicated time for professional development, and by doing so, we foster the desire to learn across roles. Creating opportunities for different learning styles, providing engaging offerings, and celebrating success add up to an effective learning culture that benefits existing team members, new hires, and the organization as a whole.



It starts at the top

Our leaders create time and space for learning. One of the tangible outcomes of this commitment is Learning Days, where we block employee calendars one Friday per month so that teams have dedicated windows of time to commit to learning.

Focus on skills by role

We've also put in place powerful role-based skill-building plans for employees in customer- and partner-facing roles that focus on required and recommended training. These plans act as a heatmap of the most important focus areas for learning during a particular time frame. We build these plans annually and update them quarterly with input from our business stakeholders and field leaders.

When implementing skill-building strategies across our organization, we try to follow the 70-20-10 rule—that is, 70% of learning should come from on-the-job training, 20% through learning from others, and 10% from more formal training opportunities.



Look for ways to get employees involved

We're creative about involving everyone as an active participant in the learning experience. For example, our Contributor Program encourages employees to develop and contribute learning content in their areas of expertise—essentially training for employees by employees. And those who create content are recognized through a rewards program, receiving badges that they can post on LinkedIn.

Share best practices broadly

In a world with rapid and constant technological change, it's more important than ever to share learning best practices across the organization so that teams can keep pace. Based on the lessons we've learned from training our technical and non-technical employees on our own AI apps and services, we recently published [10 Best Practices to Accelerate Your Employees' AI Skills At Microsoft](#), which shares insights and strategies on organizational skill-building. These best practices represent the foundation of our efforts to skill up our teams and are widely applicable for other organizations looking to do the same.

By taking a structured approach to skill-building, you're already stewarding a learning culture in your organization. Over time, you can build on these actions to create even more momentum. Combined with a skills-first mindset, you're establishing the groundwork to close the gap and prepare your teams with technical skills for today and tomorrow.

Celebrate successes

To reinforce the importance of upskilling, highlight its benefits and celebrate team members' success and achievements. When team members see the positive impact, they're more likely to embrace training and to encourage others to participate. Team members can even share their successes with their colleagues on professional social networks, like LinkedIn.

Provide continuous feedback

Coaching employees and providing them with continuous feedback can help improve their skills and identify areas where they can grow. Regular check-ins and feedback sessions can help employees feel supported and encouraged to continue learning.

Encourage collaboration

Support knowledge-sharing and collaborative learning among team members. Foster a culture where employees are empowered to ask questions and seek out opportunities to learn from each other. Everyone benefits when employees work together to solve problems and share their expertise.



Simplify your skill-building efforts with Microsoft Learn

Skills development is crucial to meeting changing needs and priorities. By proactively identifying skills gaps, creatively using tools and resources, building a learning culture, and maintaining a skills-first focus, you can help ensure that your teams thrive in a dynamic environment.

Drive more success by boosting your team's technical skills with curated offerings from Microsoft Learn for Organizations. Jump-start team training and close skills gaps with tailored learning with Plans, access to Course Videos training and Microsoft-verified credentials organizations need to keep pace with fast-evolving technology and new roles and responsibilities.

Drive success by boosting
your team's technical skills

Visit Microsoft Learn
for Organizations

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