DIGITAL UPSKILLING DURING A PANDEMIC

Pulling out his map and compass, Paul D Jagger CITP FBCS — IBM Global Business Services — Talent and Transformation — considers how Covid-19 has fundamentally altered how learning and development programmes should be designed and deployed.

During 2020, the UK has undergone an unprecedented — and accelerated — shift to digital commerce, education and socialising. The Covid-19 global pandemic has touched our professional and personal lives in ways few could have anticipated at the outset of the year. By way of example, the retail industry guru and former Dragon's Den investor, Theo Paphitis, stated that his industry had undergone five years of digital transformation in just three months. Just consider how much online

The accelerated transformation to digital commerce has highlighted the need for businesses to develop new and enhanced digital skills among their employees; but what exactly are those skills? How does a business identify what skills gaps exist in the workforce? Most importantly, how does a business or an employee measure progress in up-skilling to exploit the advantages of digital transformation?

With hundreds of thousands of

content learners don't consume*. Added to that, there is a plethora of free content available on the internet. Rarely is it the case that a skills gap can be plugged simply by providing access to yet more content.

What businesses and employees need is an industry-specific competency model, to help them plan and navigate their upskilling and reskilling journey.

What is a competency model?

A competency model defines the knowledge, skills and desirable behaviours (competencies) for a set of job roles in a given occupation or industry. Roles in a common functional area (e.g. human resources, procurement, operations, IT) are grouped together in 'job families'; these may, in turn be aligned with the career grades present in an organisation.

Each job role defined in the competency model will have a unique title, a description of the duties and suggested performance criteria (a success profile). It may even include recommended learning and professional development activities. In this manner, a competency model provides both the map and compass with which a business and its employees may plan its talent strategy. A competence model may also be used in partnership with further and higher education to enable examination and awarding bodies to develop qualifications that meet the needs of employers.

Without a competency model, businesses tend to measure learning progress in terms of outputs rather than outcomes. Without a competency model, it is difficult to know if any particular

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shopping vs how many cash transactions you have made since March...

The shift to digital is impacting the workplace in a profound way, with many of us now working from home and using technology to collaborate with colleagues and clients. How many hours are you spending in virtual meetings compared to at the beginning of the year? How much overseas business travel have you done recently? These trends are likely to stay with us even when an effective vaccine is found. The shift to digital is here to stay.

The businesses that are most likely to thrive, while social distancing continues, are those that can embrace digital commerce with agility; from online bookings to digital payments, digital is the way ahead for many areas of business. The same is true for the workforce: as we enter a deep recession and hopefully a swift recovery, it is those who are able to upskill and reskill that will be most able to weather the storm.

employees furloughed, many businesses have taken the opportunity to invest in learning programmes, especially in digital skills, but is upskilling just about consuming more learning content?

Surely content is king?

During the lockdown period, major IT suppliers have launched free or freemium digital learning programmes to help plug the digital skills gap on topics from AI to blockchain, cloud to data science. By and large, these initiatives have been done out of a sense of corporate social responsibility; some are, inevitably, thinly disguised advertorials for paid services. But is the answer to 'digital upskilling' simply about employees consuming more learning content?

Businesses in particular are already awash with digital learning content — learning management systems, social computing platforms, knowledge sharing systems are all packed to the brim with

programme learning is relevant to closing skills gaps. Of course, an analysis of learning outcomes can be undertaken for each learning activity in a learning journey, but this becomes time consuming and costly when applied to the tens, or even hundreds of thousands of learning activities available to employees in most large businesses.

Measuring outputs is a waste of time when there is a need to upskill. Businesses need to measure time to competence among the workforce, rather than how many learning hours have been consumed or what percentage of learners have recorded completions. Knowing that 40% of employees have completed a course isn't the same as verifying those employees have the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to be competent in the performance of their role.

A competency model, when combined with employee pre-and post-assessment, provides the means to define and measure skills gaps. When learning content is tagged to the model's knowledge, skills and behavioural definitions, it can help plan a structured learning journey.

Some larger enterprises have developed their own competency models, but these tend to be limited to specific functions within the business, such as leadership or sales. The truth is, competency models require a significant effort to create and require constant maintenance to keep abreast of developments in the industry. In-house competency models may not get maintained and generally don't cover all the job roles at all levels of competence and all the job families in the organisation — let alone across the industry within which the organisation operates.

Are ready-made models the answer?

Several professional bodies have their own competency models, although many of these are usually simpler skills taxonomies that define skills but are not aligned to job roles and job families. Skills taxonomies lack the holistic reach of a competency model which defines underpinning knowledge, skills and desirable behaviours, aligned to job roles at various levels of seniority, with recommended learning

activities and performance statements.

One example of a skills taxonomy that spans the IT profession is **SFIA**, the Skills Framework for the Information Age. Other skills taxonomies that are relevant to digital skills include those available from the Institute of Information Security Professionals and the IT Services Management Forum. There are similar skills taxonomies for project management, software testing and other areas of IT practice.

It is possible to use these and other skills taxonomies to create a competence model, but a business will have much work

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to do in mapping the knowledge, skills and behaviours to job roles within job families. It will also need a system to maintain the competency model, align it with the career grades in the business, adapt job titles and integrate with HR information systems.

Because competency models are time consuming and costly to create and maintain, several commercial products exist that can be licensed for integration with HR information systems and learning management systems. When a competency model is combined with workforce planning tools and tagged to learning, it provides the skills 'map and compass' that allow an organisation to create learning journeys that meet business objectives, in a way that can be measured with accuracy.

Competency models are a tool of strategic workforce planning and can be used in the process of identifying, attracting and recruiting skilled talent into the business, as well as in developing those already in the business. They can be used by recruiters and jobseekers, educators and learning providers, as well as by employers and employees if tied into a business' talent acquisition and talent development processes.

Where next for workplace learning?

I predict that the next major development

in talent development will be the integration of competency models into learner experience platforms and AI-enabled tagging of learning content to the taxonomy of knowledge, skills and behaviours present in those models. AI-enabled competency models will support learners with learning recommendations, personalised learning journeys, skills inference and provide a common industry knowledge domain for virtual learning assistants.

Without a competency model, a business can never be certain its investment in learning is helping the workforce meet

business goals and employees can't be sure they are pursuing learning that will help them upskill and reskill to maintain career vitality.

*Regulated industries, in particular, use learning to evidence compliance. This has caused consumption to peak around a tiny proportion of content. One financial service sector organisation in Europe found that of 4,000 courses in its LMS, greater than 80% of consumption was of 4% of the LMS catalogue — all compliance/regulatory courses. A UK life sciences business found that only 4% of learning hours were spent on professional development — so ingrained was the culture of compliance-based learning.

About SFIA

The Skills Framework for the Information Age: SFIA is a globally-recognised standard, developed by industry experts and backed by government as best practice for identifying and developing IT capability. Find out more:

<https://www.bcs.org/membership/sfiaplus-it-skills-framework/>