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JAILBREAK THE DEGREE: UPSKILLING IS THE CURRENCY OF THE FUTURE OF WORK



Kelly Palmer is a thought leader on the future of work, learning, and career development. She is the chief learning and talent officer at Degreed, an education technology company, coauthor of the book “The Expertise Economy: how the smartest companies use learning to engage, compete and succeed,” and the former chief learning officer of LinkedIn. Prior to LinkedIn, Kelly was vice president of learning at Yahoo! and held executive positions in learning, M&A, and product development at Sun Microsystems.

In our book “The Expertise Economy,” my co-author, David Blake, and I emphasize the need for continuous learning, how learning can be a competitive advantage for companies, and why upskilling the workforce is the most urgent issue of our time. The importance of these issues has only accelerated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Now more than ever, focusing on skills and learning is essential because of the rapid pace of digital transformation, technology advances, and the implications this has on jobs and skills of the future.

Today’s employees need to be learning all the time, and they can’t just rely on a four-year education to take them through the entirety of their career. Every function in every industry is transforming, so people need to be continuously learning new skills. Skills become even more important as companies realize it’s not what you know, but what you can do with what you know that matters.

In the last few years, many companies such as IBM, Apple, and Google have been declaring that they won’t require a degree to get a job. We will see more companies following that lead, realizing that there is a lot of untapped talent not even being considered for jobs because they lack a college degree. Too many people have some college, equivalent experience, or have adaptability and an aptitude for learning, but are getting passed up for great job opportunities. Resumes get sorted out and talent is overlooked.

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Even when people do have a college degree, there's still a tremendous need to continually build skills. Every function is transforming – some jobs are being eliminated because of automation, other jobs are changing dramatically, and new jobs and roles are being created every day. This requires new skills for everyone. For example, software developers need to learn the latest development technologies and understand the implications of artificial intelligence and machine learning. The HR function now needs to think about data insights and people analytics. The learning function will need to keep up with all the new learning technologies being created. The World Economic Forum states that we need to upskill a billion people by 2030. That means we need to think very differently about corporate learning if we want to meet that challenge.

Learning how people learn: the key to transform antiquated learning models and build empowered employees

When I switched careers to focus on the learning field, I was amazed by how antiquated learning was in the corporate environment. Companies were “training” people based on old university models of lecture-based learning and very focused on knowledge sharing. Studies show that lecture-based learning is not a very effective model because people don't remember what they learn unless they apply it to real work. Contrast that to the more effective and diverse ways

people learn with different resources and tools. For example, people can and do learn in a variety of ways – they can watch videos, listen to podcasts, read books, practice skills, get feedback, and learn from peers in the flow of work. Often that type of learning isn't counted as "official" learning, but it's how real learning happens. Learning in corporate settings is now evolving from pure knowledge sharing to true skill building and companies are realizing that we need to rethink our learning models to meet the challenge of upskilling the workforce.

According to our latest research at Degreed, we know that people learn best when multiple learning methods are blended together.¹ The world is fundamentally changing, yet too many companies are stuck to old ideas about how work happens and about how people grow and develop in their careers. In the antiquated learning model, employers tell employees what to learn and when to learn it in a "one-size-fits-all" model. Often the learning mandate is based on a manager request or on a complex competency model.

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Today, what's most important about learning is to understand what motivates each individual to learn, what learning is most relevant, and how managers and leaders can give guidance to identify the most critical skills given an individual's career goals and the company's strategic priorities. It's also important that people focus on only a few

¹ Degreed, "How the Workforce Learns," 2019.



“It’s also important that people focus on only a few skills at a time, which helps employees feel less overwhelmed.”

skills at a time, which helps employees feel less overwhelmed. This learning model may sound simple, but it is a huge shift in thinking for most companies.

Most companies have learning and talent strategies that don’t incorporate what science tells us is most effective about how we learn. Companies should give employees more agency over what to learn and help guide them in the right direction given career goals and business objectives. A great example of this is how the Visa L&D team reimagined its learning culture to one that is worker-driven. Central to this effort was the creation of a learning technology system (powered by Degreed) through Visa University. The technology ecosystem personalized and simplified learning for all 20,000 employees by curating content based on the individual’s interest or needs and proactively recommending projects or assignments employees are qualified for across the company.

A skilling strategy demonstrates your commitment to the employee

To set a well-defined skilling strategy – one that invests in employees' continuous learning, identifies and fills skill gaps, and keeps people employable – a strategic vision of the industry and the company is needed. For example, gathering data and insights to understand industry and job trends, understanding how certain jobs are changing because of technology or automation, and identifying where the skills might be in greatest demand are three key elements. Then, the key is to identify how the company needs to adapt given these changes.

At the core of this strategy is the need for companies and individuals to think about the skills they have and the skills they need. Many companies don't have a baseline of the skills their people have, so it's difficult to measure progress without that baseline. Organizations can use both upskilling (teaching new skills or enhancing existing abilities to advance in a current role) and reskilling (learning a new set of skills for a completely new role) in their skilling strategy.

Understanding the skills of your workforce is beneficial for multiple reasons. For example, companies are better positioned to make tough decisions about workforce reductions or redeployments if they know what skills their people have. When going after new business opportunities, companies can look to internal talent to meet the needs rather than hiring externally. What many companies are finding is that sometimes people with critical skills don't necessarily exist in the workforce and they would be better off reskilling or upskilling their existing talent.

To think about an upskilling strategy, companies should first identify the critical skills they need to stay competitive in their business. Once those critical skills are identified, then companies can design and develop learning programs that will help employees build those critical future skills.

For example, at Degreed, I'm currently working with our sales organization on an upskilling strategy. Like most sales organizations, our sales team needs to effectively communicate the value of our products in a rapidly changing environment. To ensure the team is prepared for the future, we identified three critical skills: critical thinking, learning agility, and empathy. To establish a baseline of these skills among our sales team, identify skill gaps, and measure progress, each sales rep assessed themselves against those three critical skills using Degreed Skill Review. They entered details about the work they have done, their experiences, their learning and then rated their skills. They had their manager rate their skills as well to get a strong baseline of where they started in their skill journey so we could measure progress.

Internal career marketplaces is a win-win for both employees and employers alike

Once critical skills are identified and assessed, an employee chooses one or two skills to focus on. Typically, there are a variety of learning programs to help employees build these skills. For example, at Ericsson, they have a sales academy called "SET2WIN" where they identified key critical skills. Then they provided learning that includes several components: curated content pathways to gain knowledge, practice assignments, peer-based mini-projects, and a final capstone project where they demonstrate proficiency in those critical skills. On completion, they get an Ericsson sales credential that goes on their learner profile.

Showing progress against skills not only motivates employees, but also helps them get new opportunities in their company – opportunities that allow them to start applying those new skills on the job. Opportunities can include things such as stretch assignments, new projects, mentoring, or sometimes even completely new roles.

Our research has found that the most advanced upskilling strategies

include engaging learning experiences that help people build skills through practice, feedback, and reflection.² Employees don't have to leave their company to develop new skills or gain new experiences. Rather, companies can create "talent marketplaces" where people can get new projects and opportunities and completely new jobs based on the skills that they already have or those that they are building. With a talent marketplace, employees can continue to grow their career and gain experience without having to go change companies – a win-win for both the employee and the employer.

Oftentimes, companies look externally for talent, but it's advantageous to first look for talent inside that could fill an open position before looking externally. This is particularly true in the case of rare or in-demand skills where it is hard to recruit external talent in today's market, such as data analysts or e-commerce skills.

Research shows that employees stay an average of 41% longer at companies that do a good job hiring from within.³ As we wrote in "The Expertise Economy," eBay was an early adopter of a career marketplace. This kind of system allows employees to not only gain experiential learning, but also highlight their skills and their ongoing development efforts. It also helps managers and leaders across the organization find the talent they need internally.

In many companies, talent acquisition and learning teams are often siloed, with the former only focusing outside, and the latter inside. This is a challenge that can be overcome; more and more companies are combining these organizations or creating a stronger partnership between the learning and recruiting functions to benefit both the organization and the employee.

² *The Expertise Economy*, Palmer and Blake, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2018.


³ LinkedIn, Global Talent Trends 2020.

Skilling is a competitive advantage for the future of work

The days of investing in learning only for leaders, managers, and high-potential employees is gone. Companies need to invest in learning for *all employees* and taking this approach can be a huge competitive advantage in developing and retaining talent.

Skills are the currency of the future of work. If you understand the skills of people within your organization, you can understand their skill gaps and provide guidance on the most important skills for the future. When employees build new skills, it provides opportunities for both the individual and for the enterprise. People want to grow and develop in their careers and when they can do that inside their company and get new opportunities to learn, grow, and advance in their careers, it's a huge competitive advantage. Companies can retain their top talent and have an engaged and motivated workforce.

I told an audience of soon-to-be college graduates at the University of California, Berkeley recently, "You most likely will have a choice of which company you work for when you graduate. Make sure any prospective employer will be investing in your career and in your ongoing learning and development. Ask them directly, 'what are the concrete ways you are developing your employees on an ongoing basis?' Leaders who realize the importance of continuous learning will be way ahead of the game. Companies that question the value of investing in their people will certainly lose out on the best talent.



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