

**NATION
SWELL**

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Skilling the future workforce: 8 recommendations for corporate leaders

Read time: 20 minutes or less

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The bottom line

Private sector engagement with skills-based hiring is increasing in response to employment gaps and escalating economic precarity. Between [2017 and 2019](#), 46% of middle-skill and 31% of high-skill occupations experienced material degree resets. And in 2022, 79% of HR professionals [reported that scores](#) on skills assessments are just as or more important than traditional criteria in hiring decisions.

These are positive trends from an economic and a social perspective. Skills-based hiring is critical to increasing equity and diversity in the workplace, as traditional credential-based hiring tends to screen out, disqualify, or exclude applicants without a four year degree

[Analysis](#) from Opportunity@Work suggests there are more than 30 million workers who are skilled through alternative routes (i.e., pathways other than a bachelor's degree) and who have the skills needed to transition to roles that pay significantly higher wages. When employers deploy skills-based hiring practices instead of pedigree-based practices, they bridge this opportunity gap and expand their pools of talent to include 79% of Hispanic workers and 68% of Black workers who do not have a bachelor's degree. Further, employers can expect to see an increase in the quality of new hires as well as increases in productivity, employee engagement, and retention.

While increased commitment to skills-based hiring is an important step toward a more prepared and more inclusive workforce, many companies are learning that in-demand skills do not exist in adequate supply. Some of those businesses are taking it upon themselves to develop the skills-based talent pipeline that will be necessary to power their organizations, industries, and broader market into the future. Notably, in 2022, a majority of [NationSwell's future of work survey respondents](#) (71.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that companies should be influencing the development of skills training for workers. Investments in training programs, nontraditional credentialing, and even apprenticeship programs are on the minds of many employers who are keen to fill specific gaps in the marketplace.

To better understand how companies are investing in the skills-based training ecosystem, before hiring even comes into frame, we dug deep with nine organizations on the cutting edge of workforce development. Through our conversations with leaders and practitioners, we uncovered a depth of contributions to changing and scaling the learning systems that are preparing workers for quality jobs. The following recommendations, borne from these conversations, aim to provide guidance for private sector employers who are committed to skilling the future workforce and ultimately contributing meaningfully to a more just and equitable workplace.

Our eight recommendations for corporate leaders:

1. Decide if you aim to be influential at a systems, sector, or company level

2. Position your strategy correctly within your company's infrastructure

3. Lean into (and use) your company's strengths

4. Build a well-balanced partner portfolio

5. Design for replicability and scalability

6. Mind the non-skills gap between learner and earner

7. Engage in pre-competitive transparency and collaboration

8. Bring rigor and patience to impact measurement

Strategic guidance

1. Decide if you aim to be influential at a systems, sector, or company level

Within the skill-development ecosystem, private sector organizations are adopting a variety of roles based on organizational goals, capabilities, and perceived gaps in the market – ranging from broad societal ambitions to narrowly defined business objectives. While it is plausible for a single company to fulfill multiple roles and advance a range of interests, the majority of businesses we interviewed adhere to a theory of change that is heavily weighted toward one of three primary ambitions: systems change, sector benefit, or direct company benefit. The rationales behind these approaches vary across companies, but a common thread is that strategies are strongest and most sustainable when aligned with both a business priority and a social impact goal.

“... strategies are strongest and most sustainable when aligned with both a business priority and a social impact goal.”

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Some companies aspire to **build stronger, more equitable systems** for training, skilling, and employing workers across sectors and geographies. They understand the vital importance of hard and soft infrastructure, global frameworks, forward-looking policies, and other key systemic levers in building long-term, equitable solutions to economic mobility and hiring. They are also patient and farsighted, anticipating a long tail on their returns on investments. One example, **Walmart.org**, prioritizes funding for research and development initiatives that support the scalability and replicability of projects that hold the potential for long-term impact. Among those investments, Walmart.org is addressing the [quality and sustainability of digital credentialing](#) in skills-based training programs.

SECTOR BENEFIT

Sector-specific approaches typically aim to train individuals on skills that will benefit a certain market sector or industry as a whole. Companies taking a sector-benefit approach to their programming and investments may focus on their business area but do so from a non-competitive posture, accelerating the growth of talent for their entire field. While many beneficiaries of related skills-development initiatives will ultimately gain employment within other organizations, even competitors, others will find work with the sponsoring organization, its suppliers, its partners, and its customers.

Analyzing both its internal talent needs and the needs of its sector, **Microsoft Philanthropies** identified cybersecurity as a major skills gap within the broader technology industry. Noting the [high number of cybersecurity jobs currently unfilled](#), Microsoft [launched a national campaign in the US in 2021](#), in partnership with community colleges, to skill and recruit 250,000 workers into cybersecurity jobs by 2025. While some of these individuals will work at Microsoft, the vast majority will work for tens of thousands of other employers across the country.

COMPANY BENEFIT

Certain companies invest in training programs that directly supply talent to their own hiring pipelines, or support immediate business priorities, making their approach **company-specific**. For example, **Workday** has a named goal to hire 20% of its early and mid-career hires from its [Opportunity Onramps](#) program, which invests in and partners with training programs that serve high-potential, untapped talent. The skills taught by those programs are directly applicable to current and future roles at Workday, and the partnerships are designed to link into Workday's talent acquisition processes.

When aligning your organization's investments with the most appropriate ambition, consider the following:

- The **specific talent acquisition** needs of your company, including the nature of skills needed, the seniority level at which they're needed, and the timeline on which they're needed;
- The **transferability and universality of the skills** needed by your company relative to the skills needed by companies in its sector, industry, and customer-base;
- The **opportunity and the appetite within your company** to contribute assets and resources that may not realize a direct or near-term ROI for your business but that may have a larger aggregate societal impact.

2. Position your strategy correctly within your company's infrastructure

Companies address skills-based talent development in a variety of ways, from managing hiring practices to building curriculum for training programs. To ensure that your strategy is well-positioned for success, allow your primary goals to inform the best place(s) to locate your initiatives internally and point you toward additional departments to prioritize for collaboration. The companies we interviewed identified four main functional areas that their strategies sit within, each affording their own advantages:

SOCIAL IMPACT

As a department that is inherently dedicated to advancing societal goals, this team can harness its networks, strategies, and assets to build sector-wide change and create opportunity for large numbers of people. When developing training programs, social impact teams should engage other departments, such as government affairs and human resources, to strategize and support their work.

CORPORATE FOUNDATION

When business and philanthropy are complementary levers for change, companies are able to more effectively allocate resources and administer partnerships around skills-based initiatives. **Walmart.org's** [Creating Opportunity](#) portfolio, which encompasses philanthropic and thought leadership focused on workforce and skills development, strengthens the several skills-based programs run by Walmart itself. As complementary entities, there are feedback loops between the two organizations that allow the corporation to act more strategically (and vice versa).

HUMAN RESOURCES (HR)

When the goal is to develop a pipeline from skills-based training to internal talent acquisition, HR can help familiarize hiring managers with the benefits of your program(s) and provide control over the support that learners are given as they enter your company's workforce. For example, **Workday's** [Opportunity Onramps](#) was piloted and incubated by the Workday Global Impact team. Once the model proved successful, it moved to the HR team in order to ensure more operational alignment with hiring processes. The Global Impact team remains committed to accelerating the skills-based hiring movement through investments in direct training providers as well as systems-change workforce development partners. Giving clear jurisdiction to Workday's HR team allows for increased agency over hiring and employment practices for underrepresented talent, increases engagement with hiring managers and teams within the business, and ultimately strengthens buy-in and sustainability for Opportunity Onramps.

GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS/POLICY

Government affairs and policy teams have the capability to advance broader systems-level change through legislative advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels. For example, the [JPMorgan Chase Policy Center](#) "develops and advances sustainable, evidence-based policy solutions to drive inclusive economic growth in the U.S. and around the world," including goals related to skills-development and the future of work.

No matter where your programs live internally, there are often opportunities for cross-team coordination and collaboration. A powerful way to foster partnership across groups is to build an overarching vision or theory of change that otherwise separate teams can connect to. Developing this vision (and delegated responsibilities) can promote shared dialogue around goals for skills-based work, break down silos, and unlock more ways for teams to work together toward long-term impact.

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3. Lean into (and use) your company’s strengths

Companies vary in the assets they can provide to skills-based training programs and partnerships. For example, a technology company may deploy expertise and resources against skill-building goals that are quite different from those available to a bank. Understanding and harnessing existing company assets can help scale and optimize for impact with credibility and efficacy. Collaborating with interdisciplinary departments and teams ([see recommendation two](#)) will help you locate these assets, but your strategy will also benefit from identifying assets that transcend teams – like philanthropy, data, technology, or expertise:

“Understanding and harnessing existing company assets can help scale and optimize for impact with credibility and efficacy.”

PHILANTHROPY

There is a large and growing number of nonprofit organizations working to build the systems, content, and programming needed to sustain a skills-based talent pool for the future economy. Those organizations need funding to do their work. Here, companies can help. **Microsoft Philanthropies** has long-established work with underserved communities in the computer science and technology fields. One of its core impact areas is [Inclusive Economic Growth](#), investing in digital skills areas including digital literacy, AI, cybersecurity, computer science, credentialing, and more. Because Microsoft is a global company, its team prioritizes a global focus for skill-development. They have found that the most effective way to accomplish this reach is by forging philanthropic partnerships, building nonprofit and workforce ecosystem capacity that can, in turn, reach a high number of learners.

DATA AND TECHNOLOGY

Some organizations have access to large amounts of data that can inform and bolster skills-based training. Others have technological tools and capabilities that can provide the foundation for highly scalable learning content and other relevant programming. **LinkedIn** has both. LinkedIn's organizational vision is to "create economic opportunity for every member of the global workforce." One of its avenues to achieve this goal is through the [Economic Graph](#), a research and insights platform that studies the global workforce using LinkedIn's abundant and detailed in-house data. With information on labor markets, skills, industries, and more, this data offers governments, academics, and employers insight for future policy and business decisions. LinkedIn leverages these insights further through the [LinkedIn Learning platform](#). While the platform is typically pay-walled for employers to use for upskilling, there are a selection of free courses that can provide learners with upskilling opportunities for in-demand jobs of the future. In addition, LinkedIn's Social Impact team provides nonprofit partners with free access to the full Learning Library, ensuring that they reach larger populations of job seekers facing barriers that may not have the same means or opportunity to pay for training.

EXPERTISE

Institutional knowledge — including staff subject matter expertise — can inform the development or scaling of skills-based training programs. For example, IBM staff offer their experience and mentorship to students and professors through [IBM's Academic Ambassadors program](#). **P-TECH**, the IBM-founded high school model, uses this approach on a larger scale. Each P-TECH school operates with a [Steering Committee](#) to inform scope, recruitment, technology, student support, and more.

Because **Salesforce's** [Trailhead](#) is designed to train professionals on the company's core products, their in-house expertise is an essential ingredient. Trailhead is a free gamified learning platform that provides training on Salesforce's products along with in-demand skills like AI, data, CRM, and more to support people in finding employment with Salesforce's customers and partners. Given the range of Salesforce's products and updates, the company aims to stay ahead of its customer needs by ensuring that those working on Salesforce are agile, knowledgeable, and consistently upskilling.

4. Build a well-balanced partner portfolio

Regardless of your company's assets and capabilities, partners can help fill in gaps, reach larger target audiences, and scale work more quickly and effectively than any one organization working alone. However, selecting partners that align with your goals and resources can be challenging, especially when balancing risks and aiming to maximize potential impact. The companies that we interviewed expressed the importance of achieving the right mix of partners based on two dimensions: **scale vs. depth**, and **traditional vs. nontraditional characteristics**.

SCALE AND DEPTH

Finding a balance between the reach and depth of training programs often poses challenges for companies. More specifically, the ambition to reach large audiences, often located across the globe, can pull against the ambition to reach those audiences in ways that are sensitive to unique, local dynamics. There's also the reality that some jobs require more in-depth or niche skills, potentially limiting the scalability of relevant training initiatives. Several of the companies we interviewed noted their strategy for addressing the tension between scale and depth hinges upon partnering with a mix of organizations that excel at one or the other. For example, it can be beneficial to balance large, established partners with smaller localized partners that have greater capacity for experimentation and innovation. Often, these local partners can take investments and assets from their employer partners and outperform expectations. They also have greater proximity to individual labor markets, enabling more tailored recruitment and programming.

TRADITIONAL VS. NONTRADITIONAL PROGRAMMING

Investing in diverse training pathways creates a more equitable system overall, as individuals have the opportunity to follow the learning path that works best for them without detriment to their future career potential. The goal of skill development and skills-based hiring should not be to create parallel systems for learners but rather to create a system that works for everyone. That goal may require companies to work directly with traditional educational institutions, including four-year colleges and universities, alongside organizations forging alternative pathways to employment. For example, **Walmart.org** works with a wide range of stakeholders through its opportunity portfolio to reach a greater number of potential learners with many different skill-based learning modalities, including in a classroom, online, and through experience. At the same time, Walmart.org invests in nontraditional organizations, including those developing Learning and Employment Records (LERs), to advance systems change and progress in the field.

“The goal of skill development and skills-based hiring should not be to create parallel systems for learners but rather to create a system that works for everyone.”

5. Design for replicability and scalability

Partners are an important ingredient for successful skills-based training initiatives, but they are not the only lever available to companies looking to achieve the greatest breadth, depth, and longevity of their impact. In seeking scale, companies do not necessarily need to trade off their audience size against personalization and location-based adaptation. Three foundational design approaches provide the basis for scalability and replicability while preserving ample room for human-centric customization and implementation: **demonstration projects**, **mass-customizable offerings**, and **“teaching the teacher” approaches**.

DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

The skilling ecosystem is primed for more demonstration projects – initiatives that can be modeled in a narrow market and, if successful, used as proof of concept for programs that can be scaled and replicated. A long-running example is **IBM's P-TECH** school model, which offers high schoolers STEM education and credentials alongside internships and other real-world experience. At P-TECH schools, the depth of instruction and experience instills an interest and passion for STEM at a young age while also providing students with a strong foundation for early careers in the sector. P-TECH schools now [number more than 300 globally](#) and partner with more than 600 companies of varied sizes.

MASS-CUSTOMIZABLE OFFERINGS

Mass-customizable skill-building tools can help companies achieve scale while leaving room for local partners to tailor the offerings to the needs of specific populations and individuals.

In building customizable training programs, companies allow their partners to assess what background and educational attainment their participants are coming with and design appropriate curricula based on that assessment. Some learners may already have foundational knowledge that sets them up

for more advanced learning, while others need that base layer. If done right, training can be tailored accordingly when built with modular systems. For example, **LinkedIn** offers introductory courses on foundational skilling topics as a part of their free and unlocked online learning curriculum alongside more advanced content. Their partners can design programming that leverages the right mix of both.

“In building customizable training programs, companies allow their partners to assess what background and educational attainment their participants are coming with and design appropriate curricula based on that assessment.”

“TEACH THE TEACHER” APPROACH

There is potential for impact and scale through educating instructors rather than working directly with learners. By “teaching the teacher” and preparing instructors with the knowledge and skills they need to develop learners into earners, companies develop the leverage they need to reach a higher number of individuals with a more effective, personal touch. Working with the same educators year-over-year provides opportunities to stay connected to the audiences they work with, solicit feedback, and ensure the most evergreen knowledge is being transmitted.

6. Mind the non-skills gap between learner and earner

In order for learners to be successful in securing and excelling in jobs, companies and training partners should provide resources that connect individuals to job opportunities, set them up for success in the job application process, and equip them with the soft skills needed to navigate a professional environment. The ideal partnership between an employer and implementation partner is one that includes a mix of curriculum support, exposure, direct employment opportunities (via internships, for example), and holistic career readiness support (writing cover letters, interviewing, preparing for an office environment, etc.).

In collaboration with employer partners, **CUNY Guttman Community College** provides students with support on cover letters, interview techniques, job fairs, and other career preparation alongside connections to employers. And, while **Salesforce** develops and delivers its own online learning platform, they also partner with workforce development organizations to provide additional forms of job preparation, interviewing support, and career readiness through the [Workforce Partner Program](#).

“In order for learners to be successful in securing and excelling in jobs, companies and training partners should provide resources that connect individuals to job opportunities, set them up for success in the job application process, and equip them with the soft skills needed to navigate a professional environment.”

Employers and training partners should also consider their role in offering a culturally sensitive and human-centered environment. This may include offering training on workplace discrimination and, for the employer’s part, considering whether their physical work environment and existing culture are welcoming to individuals who are coming to their jobs via alternative pathways.

CUNY Guttman has seen first hand the importance of considering the full experience of underrepresented talent in the workplace. As one very specific example cited by CUNY Guttman, companies with intensive security processes can make some individuals feel uncomfortable and intimidated by the work environment, limiting their ability to feel equally equipped for a professional opportunity.

7. Engage in pre-competitive transparency and collaboration

At a moment when so many actors are engaging in good-faith investments to build skills in the future workforce and design alternative pathways to employment, there is little benefit to be found in provinciality and opacity. To the contrary, creative unlocks, alignment opportunities, and systems-level change all depend on willing and active collaboration among companies, NGOs, and other participants in the skilling ecosystem. Leaders should consider the following models and approaches to pre-competitive transparency and collaboration:

“At a moment when so many actors are engaging in good-faith investments to build skills in the future workforce and design alternative pathways to employment, there is little benefit to be found in provinciality and opacity.”

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Given the relatively new attention on skills-based training and hiring across industries, sharing learnings through communities of practice is high-value for companies and partners. **Microsoft Philanthropies** collaborates with its partners to gather and disseminate data and learnings. It launched a community of practice in February 2023 to bring their NGO partners together, encourage dialogue, and share best practices between each other.

EXCHANGING PARTNER INTELLIGENCE

Some companies are developing evidence-based evaluations of their partners to determine which are most effective. The results of these evaluations subsequently inform their decision-making on who to partner with in the future. However, the results of these evaluations do not always get fed back to partners in ways that could help them improve their own programming, and they are generally not shared with other companies who could benefit from inputs to their own partner selection processes. Sharing more openly and more often can accelerate impact, helping companies find the partners best suited for their goals.

JOINT COMMITMENTS ON ALTERNATIVE HIRING PATHWAYS

Although training programs often focus on specific skills development, there are ways for employers to translate training into systems-changing hiring commitments. The goal of **Salesforce's** Trailhead is not to employ people at Salesforce itself but to prepare them for jobs at Salesforce's many customers. For that reason, Salesforce launched the [Talent Alliance](#), in which employers commit to interviewing or hiring a certain number of people certified through Salesforce training programs. Talent Alliance hiring partners benefit by getting access to well-qualified potential hires, and the talent market benefits through direct connections to employers committed to hiring underrepresented talent.

8. Bring rigor and patience to impact measurement

Given the large-scale changes that companies are often aiming to make with their skills-based training initiatives, impact typically requires diligence and patience. To satisfy near and medium-term stakeholder interests, gather real-time learnings to improve your programs, and monitor progress against longer-term objectives, we recommend developing an impact measurement framework that combines **leading** and **lagging** indicators:

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LEADING INDICATORS

For near and mid-term evaluation, it is helpful to look at readily quantifiable indicators such as the number of individuals trained, teachers enabled, or credentials earned. These are some of the figures tracked by organizations like **Microsoft Philanthropies**. Partners are often instrumental in collecting this data as they are typically more hands-on with learners. Partners may also track a number of their own impact metrics that can provide additional insights into your work.

LAGGING INDICATORS

There are also opportunities to track the long-term impact of skills development programs, such as the number of learners hired into relevant jobs, their pay, and career advancement. This data, however, can be considerably more challenging to attain, particularly if your skills-based training initiatives are not directly supplying your company’s own talent pipeline. In that case, implementation partners become even more critical in helping to establish metrics and collect data over time.

When training initiatives are designed to place learners into jobs at your own company, lagging indicators should be more readily available. At **Workday**, for example, Opportunity Onramps was launched with a goal of providing 20% of early and mid-career hires for Workday by the end of 2023. As such, the company rigorously tracks annual hiring rates from the program to monitor their progress against their goal.

Coda

Corporations are eager to influence the skills-based talent ecosystem. From the perspective of stakeholders and organizational leaders, skilling the future workforce is good for business and good for society – a double win. But through this research process, we learned that finding the right point of entry is difficult for many companies.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is that, with the widening pool of actors, there is substantial risk of creating parallel systems that aren't mutually reinforcing (e.g. building credentialing systems for the same skills using different terminology). To avoid reiteration, companies should prioritize collaboration with peers (even competitors) who can inform strategy development, and with experienced organizations that can bring thought partnership to action. In doing so, companies will contribute to a more integrated and holistic network of solutions while continuing to advance their organizational objectives.

Related resources

FEATURED PARTICIPANT PROGRAMS

- [IBM - P-TECH](#)
- [JPMorgan Chase - Policy Center](#)
- [LinkedIn - Economic Graph](#)
- [LinkedIn and Microsoft - Free Learning](#)
- [Microsoft - Cybersecurity Campaign](#)
- [Microsoft - Inclusive Economic Growth](#)
- [Opportunity@Work - The Paper Ceiling](#)
- [Salesforce - Talent Alliance](#)
- [Salesforce - Trailhead](#)
- [Walmart - Creating Opportunity](#)
- [Workday - Opportunity Onramps](#)

RELATED READINGS

- NationSwell, [Eight actions for creating catalytic cross-sector partnerships](#)
- Opportunity@Work, [Hire for Skills It Takes to Do the Job](#)
- Burning Glass Institute, [The Emerging Degree Reset](#)
- Burning Glass Institute, [How Skills Are Disrupting Work](#)
- LinkedIn, [Skills-First: Reimagining the Labor Market and Breaking Down Barriers](#)
- World Economic Forum, [The Future of Jobs 2023](#)

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