



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H0569U
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
SEPTEMBER 26, 2019

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In 2018, [35% of the U.S. population](#) had at least four years of college education — the most in history. But while we might have the most educated population ever, these degrees aren't necessarily giving people the practical work skills they need.

College degree programs simply cannot keep pace with how fast things are changing in the workforce. Many students are currently being prepared for [jobs that no longer exist](#), and many don't have the *right* skills for the job they want. Skills gaps are [prevalent](#) and [widening](#).

This becomes even more problematic as more and more of our [work tasks are automated](#). Automation means that grads could be doing higher-value work earlier in their careers, as machines take over repetitive or mundane tasks. On the one hand, this actually suits this demographic's demand for autonomy and [responsibility earlier in their careers](#). But it also means that they'll need to be better prepared for what lies ahead: more and more employers are going to require exceptional soft skills — the ability to write, listen, and communicate effectively.

The good news is that new graduates are well-qualified to bridge their own skill gaps. Yes, this demographic of under-30 workers are known to be [more demanding](#) and [anxious](#). But, they are also curious, and focused on agency, purpose, self-direction, and [self-development](#). They're aware that their careers will meander through multiple roles, industries, and company sizes, and they're motivated to keep moving forward.

The way this cohort will solve the skills dilemma is through smart, iterative skills acquisition, sensibly and loosely guided by need. New grads already have the foundation of a college degree, so building new skills does not have to take the path of heavy-duty, multi-year qualifications, which are often outmoded and cumbersome. Instead, those new to the workforce can access the near-infinite resources available to them online, as well as the technologies (consumer software and apps) to filter them.

Reskilling and continuously building skills throughout a career are important to bring about lateral (and indeed vertical) career transitions for all ages, but will be particularly vital for this new graduate demographic as they strive to keep up with the [skills and work of the future](#).

So what should new grads be doing? Think about the skills that you have now and the job you want 18 months from now, and then:

- Identify the key soft skills ([power skills](#)) you have and need. You can then see where you have gaps and put learning goals in place to fill them. Examples of important power skills include critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and learning agility. Learning agility is your most important skill because it means you have the curiosity and motivation to continuously learn new skills throughout your career.
- Consider core technical skills you have that are likely to stay in high demand, such as digital literacy, data science, and data analytics. And then build upon those skills.
- Focus on skills that are portable and that will be critical regardless of what field you enter. Highlighting your transferable skills will showcase your abilities in unique ways. For example, the data analytics skills you developed in your marketing job may be just as valuable — or even more valuable — in e-commerce or product development.

- Keep a permanent, [personal list](#) of past and future learning. This will help you have better conversations about your skills in interviews and on the job.
- Discover, filter, and *apply* your learning. There are many resources available at low or no cost. Utilize technology. We both work at learning technology companies — [Degreed](#), where Kelly is Chief Learning and Talent Officer, helps you discover and track learning and understand what skills you need, and [Filtered](#), where Marc is CEO and co-founder, identifies high quality, personalized learning content. You can also use [Twitter Lists](#) for streams of topic-specific material from those you choose to follow and platforms like YouTube have many relevant talks and interviews. Whatever technology you use, the application of what you’re learning is still up to you and requires an eagle eye for opportunities. For example, if you’re in an important meeting and you’ve just watched a talk about speaking up when you feel intimidated, consider how to practice that emerging skill. Unlike at college, knowledge is not enough; you need to be able to actually *use* that knowledge.
- Be prepared to be thrust into decision-making responsibilities from day one. Practice more self-direction, in work and in learning. You may be fortunate enough to have a manager or a mentor who can help guide you, but ultimately only you are responsible for your own career.

And what about people who haven’t yet decided on college or university? The [college-for-all mantra](#) in the U.S., and Tony Blair’s [Higher Education for 50% pledge](#) in the UK, and equivalents elsewhere are now deeply ingrained in society. But this is not the right path for everyone, especially when the potential [for student debt](#) is factored in. [Apprenticeships](#) can often come with many of the advantages of a college education (including literal college credits) without the debt, and are offered by some of the most prestigious companies, [such as Amazon](#). Another option is to take an entry level job and in the meantime utilize some of the free world-class education available online, including but not limited to [MOOCs](#). A third option is to go to college and gain as much paid work experience as you can.

Many companies view learning and reskilling opportunities as a competitive advantage and a way to attract the best talent. And new college grads are also deciding where to work based on how they can learn and develop on the job. So while the responsibility lies with new grads, there’s still an opportunity for progressive employers:

- Know that some employers are already [meeting new college grads where they are](#) and providing them with opportunities to lead, learn, and grow on the job right away. The bar is rising.
- Facilitate and catalyze learning rather than trying to control it. Provide new hires with a variety of high-quality resources. In tandem, provide them with enabling technologies to [assess skills](#), [recommend content](#), help set and track learning goals, and gain credit for achieving those goals. These days, such tools [should integrate](#) with your main workflow and HR technologies.
- Encourage your employees to realize the power of [learning from their peers](#). They needn’t wait for a class to start learning something new. Instead, motivate your team to learn from those around them by seeking out expertise from their colleagues. Know someone who’s adept at data visualization or using spreadsheets? Ask them to share some of their expertise.

- Hire for and [celebrate curiosity](#) and learning agility. Ask candidates during the interview process what they learned last week or last month to get a sense of their curiosity.
- Ensure that [managers support staff](#) in developing skills sooner. Provide an environment where employees feel comfortable learning as part of their jobs and in the flow of work. Help employees make learning a daily habit by carving out time in the week just for learning (even 30 minutes a week can really make a difference). And ask managers to model learning behaviors, for example by recommending a book, article, or podcast that they find interesting to encourage continuous learning.
- Recognize that [reskilling and upskilling is far more efficient](#) than recruiting. Numerous [studies](#) have shown that the costs of reskilling are far lower than letting go of workers and hiring new ones. There's a real business case for reskilling over recruiting.

The work-readiness of new grads is a substantial but solvable problem. Graduates need to adopt the mindset, methods, and wealth of technologies now available to determine their career direction and success. And employers can provide a reassuring tailwind, which will create a stronger workforce, and help the bottom line.

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