

BY CHERYL LASSE

There's a widening gap between the haves and the have-nots with respect to the right skills for today's work, according to the Manpower Group's 2017 report *The Skills Revolution: Digitization and Why Skills and Talent Matter*. Those with the right skills will be able to increasingly control their destiny, choosing how, where, and when they work, while those without the required skills will not be able to envision how their circumstances will improve. This polarization of the workforce must be stopped.





Pinpoint your organization's skills gaps with
an organization-wide skills assessment.

~~MIND THE GAP~~
KNOW THE GAP

At the same time, organizations need to understand the impact of this widening gap on their business. If employees' abilities to complete the necessary work in a way that enables the organization to retain its competitive advantage continues to diminish, how will the company survive? Since work is increasingly dependent on higher-level skills such as innovation, critical thinking, strategic thinking, and design thinking, an understanding of both the problem's size and the potential impact is imperative.

How do you know how big the problem is?

I like to define problems in ways I can touch and manipulate. If I can formulate a simple math equation to represent the problem, I know I'm on my way to solving it. Luckily, skills gaps are a simple equation: job requirements – your proficiency = skills gaps.

To identify the skills gaps that exist in your organization, look at the skills you need now as well as the requirements that are just around the corner, so you can conduct strategic workforce planning and figure out how you can upskill your workforce to be ready. Together, these represent the job requirements. I'll cover more on how to define them in a moment.

Here's an example: You work for a manufacturing company's talent development function. The organization has a large IT staff who are responsible for building and supporting the systems that provide the organization with the data it needs to run. Let's say that the way the company needs to capture and share data with suppliers and customers must change, but the IT staff don't have the skills for the new technology. Suddenly those IT skills gaps could put the organization at risk of failure.

You must be able to capture the skills data from each individual and aggregate them in a way that tells you just how large a skills gap problem the organization has. That is the purpose of a skills assessment.

How do you get started?

To perform a skills assessment, you must identify what employees need to be able to do in their jobs to achieve their part of corporate strategy. You can accomplish that with a role-based competency model that defines the skills for success. What makes it different from corporate-wide competencies is that role-based competency models describe for each person specifically what that employee needs to do in her job.

For example, if the corporate-wide competency is *business acumen*, the role-based competency

for a salesperson may be driving the customer decision-making process through knowledge of how the customer makes money, industry trends, and our business model; while the role-based competency for a call-center representative may be making customer decisions that demonstrate an understanding the impact of those decisions have on company revenue.

There are three critical success factors to ensuring you get the skills assessment data you need.

The model must include behavioral examples of what a skill looks like at various proficiency levels. The examples must be:

- specific enough to enable objective assessment of proficiency
- clearly differentiated between proficiency levels without guessing
- easy to understand
- in the language of the person in that role (not academic, corporate-speak)
- observable
- not knowledge tests but rather assessments of what the person can do with what he knows.

Take, for instance, the skill *influence and persuade others to drive action*. Examples of the behaviors an employee proficient at level 1 are:

- responds to others' opinions as they are presented
- alters his messaging on demand based on what is said.

In comparison, an employee with level 5 "expert" proficiency of the same skill can be defined as someone who:

- successfully influences leaders to change their opinion or decision on critical items
- is perceived internally as an authority on how to customize messaging to various levels of an organization (conversationally savvy)
- overcomes strong position-based disagreement with an agreement based on mutual interests.

The model should be a concise set of skills (current and near future) that are most critical for success now. The skills in the model will and should change over time depending on how a role evolves. Or maybe the skills remain the same but the processes, tools, and technologies represented in the behavioral examples change. No one will accurately assess on 70 skills; it's too overwhelming, and the data you get will reflect their exhaustion.

Be sure to limit the number of competencies to something more manageable, such as 20, that are critical to success in the role.

The model should make it easy, once results exist, to communicate to leadership specifically

what people can and can't do well. Because it's a role-based competency model that specifically connects skills to corporate strategy, leaders will understand what skills gaps really mean to their ability to execute or achieve stated objectives. For example, if a leader of a public company is telling the market that the company can do X, that leader better have people capable of doing X.

This also will make it easy to develop solutions. For example, if employees can't perform relationship mapping to enhance relationships, you can create a specific skill practice, video microlearning, or e-learning module with *perform relationship mapping* as the learning objective.

How do you assess?

Once you have your role-based competency models, you need to be able to capture and aggregate assessments. You must start with a self-assessment, so that adult learning principles are upheld. Where possible, include manager or team leader assessments as well. And it may be useful to allow subject matter expert assessments, particularly for jobs where the manager doesn't have the technical capability to assess an individual on some skill.

Self-assessments are important because they're essential for buy-in to what comes next. In other words, the assessment is just the first step to the process of closing the gaps or improving capability. Part of the goal of this process is creating employee self-awareness about the expectations and their capabilities and intrinsic motivation to want to close gaps. This is what Daniel Pink refers to as "mastery."

To execute an assessment strategy, embrace technology. From the end-user perspective, if it's not easy, people won't do it. The strategy of emailing a spreadsheet from person to person can only get you so far. So, consider these technology necessities:

- It must be easy and reasonably fast (30 minutes or less). You don't want box-checking; you want people to seriously self-assess.
- Make it easy to get consistent, objective data (because it's behavior-based). Implemented properly, you use the embedded behavioral examples to communicate best practices and drive aspiration to mastery.
- Have a way to drive alignment between those who assess (self, manager, SMEs) so they can have data-driven coaching conversations without guesswork.
- Managers must have an easy way to assess their team members individually and view the results of those assessments in aggregate, so they can plan team skill-building activities and

Dos and Don'ts of Skills Assessments

Critical to success is to communicate the *why* before starting a skills assessment and to have clear rules about what you can and will do with skills data. Make sure that people who are completing the assessment know this process is all about how to make them most successful.

Don't use skills assessment data for keeping score. It should be completely separated with a real wall from the performance appraisal process. If this separation is not done, people will inflate their ratings, which will compromise your results. You need accurate results.

Don't use skills assessment data for succession planning. Instead, use it for career development from the employee's perspective, in that skills in one area point to the next best roles.

Use skills assessment data to support organizational agility. For example, one department needs extra people to support a project for one month. Skills data will tell you who can help.

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pair task-based mentors and mentees for collaborative learning.

- Be able to aggregate, slice and dice, and visualize results. That is what leadership will want to see.
- Have the data to tell the story and support next steps with regard to closing skills gaps and meeting objectives. For example, “We want to be able to develop three new applications next year using ABC technology. We have only 10 people with the target level of proficiency who can do that. We need an estimated 30. We have 15 people who are close. We can upskill those 15 and hire five. Here’s the plan for doing that.”

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Is skills assessment the end game?

A skills assessment is just the start. Your first assessment is your baseline and tells you where you are and where you need to go from here. But a skills assessment should not be a single event. As described in the Manpower research study, “the life cycle of skills is shorter than ever and change is happening at an unprecedented scale.” A skills assessment should be part of an ongoing process that drives a culture of learning.

To do that, make your skills assessment actionable, recommending and connecting people to those learning opportunities, tools, and templates that can help them close gaps or increase their proficiency. This is their personalized learning plan. What you’ve done is raised people’s awareness of their own skills gaps and intrinsically motivated them to close these gaps. Now give them specific ways to do so. Your assessment technology should facilitate scale so you can do this for thousands of employees, working at their own pace, over and over as skills and corporate strategy change.

Once you know where skills gaps exist, the data provide the talent development function with strategic direction on how to help the organization meet its goals. Aggregated personalized learning plan data become real needs assessment data for demand planning.

When you continue to perform a skills assessment over time, you can measure the impact of your skill development activities. While the finish line may look different each time, you’ll always know where you are and what you need to do to get there.

And as the organization’s strategy changes, adjust the role-based competency model’s skills so that the cycle is always moving everyone to the new destination. You can do this easily with an annual or biannual review of the model with high performers in the role.

Over time, the model enables you to measure the impact of learning, which is what the talent development function brings to the organization.

Employing a skills assessment is integral to ensuring your organization and the people in it remain capable of delivering on corporate strategy. Employees want to remain relevant and have career options, and organizations need to know whether their employees have the skills they need for today and tomorrow. Assess your employees’ skills gaps and you will have an upskilling road map for success.

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