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Skilful strategies to future-proof your firm

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been widely documented. Currently 38 per cent of Australian employers report difficulty hiring people, and this is especially true in the technology industry where there is a severe shortage of STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) skills. The problem was further exacerbated by the federal government's decision to abandon the 457 visa category, making it harder and more expensive for businesses to hire skilled foreign workers.

While the intention to encourage companies to hire and train local workers first is generally supported, we're now seeing the economic impact of protectionist policies in Britain and the US following Brexit and the Trump administration's decision to close US borders. Companies will merely set up shop elsewhere, as they're doing in Canada and Ireland.

Australia hasn't reached that point, but we are at a tipping point. Business leaders need to train their staff for the skills they will require in future. The World Economic Forum has predicted that 35 per cent of core skills considered important in the workplace for employees in 2015 will change by 2020.

Companies need to introduce continuous learning in areas that will help to future-proof their organisations. Consider the following strategies.

People leave managers, not companies. If you don't have strong leaders who are being constantly trained, they're not going to be able to hold on to the people you need to keep.

Leadership training is no longer a three-day offsite session for the top 50 in the company; it needs to start much further

down the ladder and be far more accessible. Companies must invest in interesting, scenario-based training content that leaders can use from a microlearning basis (three-minute snippets), making it easier to relate to and retain. On-demand microlearning for leaders also makes troubleshooting problems and upskilling easier, with new learning content available at the click of a button.

We know the importance of upskilling. An employer who keeps their employees skilled will increase loyalty and decrease attrition. But reskilling is also important, and this is where many local companies are coming unstuck.

For too long, hiring people in Australia has been about matching the job description to the person verbatim. Companies that look for good people who

can be retrained in new skills will come out on top; they're building loyalty by putting faith in people's abilities, while saving on the cost of constantly rehiring. Start by reviewing your skills gaps, and who might be re-skilled into those areas.

In the past, a forklift driver only needed to know how to operate their machine, whereas now invariably they're working on a tablet or computer. Our economy is run on technology and being multiskilled is now essential. For example, everyone in an organisation should know how to put their company's branding into a PowerPoint presentation, or how to drive a virtual team.

Do a stocktake of digital skills in your organisation. Find out what the employees feel would be useful general digital knowledge, and look for training content to address it.

In certain industries such as IT, it's assumed a person has the

necessary hard skills to perform their role, but the real differentiator for people who start to move up in organisations is soft skills — from presentation skills to working with customers, negotiation and emotional intelligence. These can be taught and companies need to invest more in these skills.

More women than men in Australia graduate from universities, but they're still more likely to be underemployed, working part-time and paid less. A raft of issues including continued gender bias and access to and the cost of childcare, are causing this. But companies have a choice to do something about it. Flexible work and leave for mums and dads, training programs focusing on women's leadership development, and professional development offered around part-time or flexible workers, are all ways companies can help women reach their potential.

Women account for less than one-fifth of the IT workforce in Australia. We need to be investing in programs that encourage more girls to experiment with technology, to learn to code, to consider a career in IT. Organisations like Code like a Girl are doing great things to try to close the gap, but this needs to be supported across business and government.

Tara O'Sullivan is chief creative officer of Skillsoft.

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