Tee-Up for Continuous Adaptability,
Tee-Up to Innovate

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adaptability is far and beyond the most valuable trait for which to develop in the digital age; an adaptable workforce breeds an innovative one. But organizations require a blueprint to tap into employees’ existing skillsets and to further develop their capabilities.

The T-shaped model is the bridge that helps organizations create versatile talent that is well-poised to adapt, especially as it relates to the understanding and use of disruptive technologies.
The knowledge that organizational performance is directly tied to talent strategy is not a new revelation. Nor is cultivating talent equipped with the right capabilities to meet current business demands. However, today's challenge is not just enabling talent to address current demands, but rather to adapt as the business transforms and evolves.

Adaptability is far and beyond the most valuable trait for which to develop in the digital age; an adaptable workforce breeds an innovative one. Organizations looking to develop a versatile and adaptive workforce require a blueprint to tap into employee's existing skillsets and to further develop their capabilities.

“The ideal workers of the next decade will be T-shaped, meaning they will bring deep understanding of at least one field, but can converse in the language of a broader range of disciplines.” The T-shaped model is the bridge that helps organizations develop master problem solvers and innovators. With deep functional expertise in a single field, the T-shaped employee maintains proficiency in their area of expertise, but adapts and expands their proficiency across a broader range of capabilities.

The T shaped employee development model solves for the growing challenges related to workforce mobility and sustainability. This model allows organizations to tap into their existing talent pool to identify those with the “will” to learn so they can create a highly skilled workforce that evolves along with their future building strategy. Companies who work to develop T-shaped employees maintain workforces composed of individuals who have a growth mindset, that know how to manage projects and people gracefully, and can collaborate and communicate well.

Excelling at being T-shaped includes a belief that teams, not individuals, are heroes; a willingness to decentralize the decision making to those on the front lines; and an emphasis on leaders at all levels.

INNOVATIVE TO A “T”

Popularized by IDEO CEO Tim Brown, “The vertical stroke of the T is a depth of skill that allows them to contribute to the creative process. That can be from any number of different fields: an industrial designer, an architect, a social scientist, a business specialist or a mechanical engineer. The horizontal stroke of the T is the disposition for collaboration across disciplines.”

Organizations must aim to not only survive the coming waves of workplace change but thrive in the new landscape. To succeed, companies must foster a pliable mindset of adaptability in their workforce where individuals are accustomed to learning, applying and interpreting skills, processes, systems and data, or risk becoming obsolete. As speaker, author, and strategic consultant Max McKeown once wrote, “all failure is failure to adapt.”

Yet an organization’s current talent pool is not always able to address evolving business issues, thus requiring business leaders to consider a new approach for capability development. Seeking to prepare for the future, organizations are left wondering how to reskill workers to adapt to a rapidly changing environment—at scale.

Today’s high-performing organizations recognize that in addition to traditional recruiting strategies, having an intentional plan of action to develop, upskill and reskill existing employees who have the “will,” but perhaps not yet the “skill,” reaps many rewards. And they’re reaping impressive savings: employees can develop the same skills as a new hire in 9-12 months at 1/6th of the cost. As employees upskill and reskill, company culture gets preserved, team effectiveness increases, cost structure improves, and engaged, agile, project-ready workers deliver results quickly.

The most effective learning programs are curated and directive, offering learners a clear path to new skills, competencies and opportunities within the organization. Learning should be digestible and available in the flow of work and contain multiple modalities that reflect how modern learners learn best. Learning journeys that map users’ progression to a new skill or role can help employees deepen or broaden their knowledge.

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TEE UP FOR SUCCESS

For organizations, investments in preparing a T-shaped workforce pay substantial dividends. The company grows a diverse set of skills amongst individuals who can communicate across disciplines. Collaboration is improved as empathy, respect, professional and leadership skills, business acumen and emotional intelligence are valued and nurtured across all functions.

Particularly impactful in technical fields, the increased emphasis on collaboration helps create more dynamic business processes and workflows, opposed to the linear order-and-execution approach of yesterday. In the collaborative paradigm, individuals more freely espouse ideas and brainstorm without the fear of judgement, leading to better innovation and ideas surfacing across the organization and creating better employee satisfaction and engagement.

CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

SILOED INDIVIDUALS

- Shared values and culture
- Free flow of info & feedback

MISSION-DRIVEN TEAMS

- Transparent goals and projects
- People reward for skills and abilities, not positions

DISTRIBUTED DECISION-MAKING

HACKATHONS
Today’s employee has made their desire for learning and development opportunities very clear. In tandem with good pay and benefits, employees of all generations crave learning opportunities and professional development. Embracing a T-shaped learning approach with the right online solutions helps organizations bolster engagement and employee contentment, making them more likely to stick around: Deloitte found that engaged employees were 87% less likely to leave their organization.

But for the employees, too, aspiring to a T-shaped individual has become a professional imperative. Aside from the need to maintain a broad technical proficiency, today’s employees must be prepared to compete in a talent economy which demands someone who can do it all: soft skills, business acumen and an understanding of various workflows to name just a few. In the age of artificial intelligence and machine learning, it is our uniquely human ability to collaborate and communicate—to engage our emotional intelligence—that keeps us forever ahead of machines.

HOW LEADING ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORT THE T-SHAPE

TEAMS, NOT INDIVIDUALS, ARE HEROES

The T-shaped philosophy was made popular through personification of a single employee, yet it’s also a defining trait of mission-driven high-performing teams—teams who succeed in large part because of the belief that it’s teams, not individuals, who are the real heroes.

The T-shape is represented in teams, as it’s how we work together to solve problems. When team members come together with a shared mission, it’s the diversity of experience and ideas that brings about successful outcomes. For this reason, collaboration has become a business imperative for high-performing organizations. And many are succeeding. But how? By realizing that every project is an opportunity and catalyst to use and develop digital dexterity. And by drawing upon the skillsets of each team member, while also bringing a mindset to learn new skills that will contribute to a successful outcome.

5 “Meet the Millennials.” Sitara Kurian, KPMG, June 2017.
7 “Developing and Sustaining High-Performance Work Teams.” Toolkit, SHRM.
DISTRIBUTED DECISION MAKING

With innovation as the penultimate goal for organizations, and adaptability through a T-shaped workforce as the clearest path there, distributed decision making, too, must become engrained in the organization's DNA. Innovation requires a willingness to try new things, brainstorm and offer up radical ideas.

The corporate milieu is one often plagued by stalled approvals and delayed information, especially in organizations where leaders still operate in a top-down, hierarchical, command and control approach. Organizations which decentralize and distribute the decision making from the executive team to leaders at all levels are able to more quickly understand what ideas resonate, which products work and increase the overall pace of innovation.

T-shaped workforces have a different opportunity. Because their employers emphasize collaboration, democratized leadership and adaptability, T-shaped employees generally have the autonomy to make decisions that enable them to affect change immediately. And freedom to make decisions helps people prioritize, re-think workflows and innovate.

LEADERS AT ALL LEVELS

Organizations aspire to be T-shaped in order to drive innovation. One of the best ways to do so is to enable leaders at all levels. At Skillsoft we've been advocating for the democratization of leadership for a long time. We've always believed that individuals who are leaders of a project or program, even if they lack the corresponding title or formal position, are still leaders and have great influence on business outcomes. These leaders are worthy of receiving leadership development to help them hone their abilities and grow their own strengths and style to drive business impact and innovations.

With a culture of T-shaped talent, management at organizations can truly action a plan to develop leaders at all levels. A philosophy that necessitates a sense of ownership for one's ideas, and a willingness to share them openly with collaborators, a strong belief in having and supporting leaders at all levels brings to the foreground fresh ideas and helps deepen and broaden the talent pool of the organizations. And by implementing a T-shaped framework for L&D, organizations will have no shortage of those ready to step to the helm and take the reins.

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8 “When to Decentralize Decision Making, and When Not To.” Herman Vantrappen and Frederic Wirtz, HBR, December 26, 2017.
Zappos CEO, Tony Hsieh, took this idea even further. Long considered a modern-day business maverick, Tony Hsieh’s leadership philosophy has been more centered on creating the right environment in which his employees can thrive than a command and control approach. Operating under these tenants, in 2016, Zappos converted its management structure to a holacracy, an environment where employees do not report to a manager and have autonomy in their day-to-day work. Instead an employee may serve as a “lead link” on a particular project, with the authority to make decisions, much like a project manager. Hsieh eliminated all bosses, manager, and titles to reduce bureaucracy and drive productivity and innovation at the online shoe retailer. Hsieh’s only regret in the process? That he waited so long to do it.9

CONCLUSION

Organizations have long faced the challenges of skills shortages and the war for top talent, yet the digital age has amplified these obstacles. Technology’s pace of change is ever-increasing and we will soon find ourselves faced with the need to near-instantaneously fill roles needed to support these advances. Beyond upskilling and reskilling their workforce, organizations must foster the mindset and ability of adaptability.

By approaching learning and development from a T-shaped perspective, companies help employees both broaden and deepen their skillsets. With technical expertise in a given field, the T-shaped employee works to further extend this knowledge while expanding the horizontal stroke where soft skills, empathy, business acumen and emotional intelligence are stored.

The duality of development helps T-shaped individuals thrive while working on the cross-functional teams that drive businesses across all industries today. Contributions to the creative process are drawn from the vertical stroke—engineering, design, product knowledge, while the ability to solve problems, work together and communicate well emerges from the horizontal stroke.

As a leader in pan-organization transformation, Skillsoft is positioned to accelerate your advances in digital readiness by upskilling and reskilling your workforce from end-to-end. By partnering with your organization, Skillsoft provides personalized learning solutions for diverse audiences that align with your business needs to ensure your employees have the skills and behaviors critical for success.

Experience Skillsoft’s innovative learning resources for free. Start a 14-day trial today.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KRISTIN SHACKELFORD

Kristin Shackelford serves as Skillsoft’s Organization Transformation Solution Principal for North America and EMEA. A seasoned strategist in the talent and learning industry, Kristin has over 20 years’ experience bringing relevant industry insights and practical experience to many of the largest global enterprises.

As a seeker of insights and customer partner in building the workforce of the future, Kristin is passionate about helping organizations develop new capabilities for the digital age to ensure they are armed with the right knowledge to future proof their organization. With the objective of a stronger DevOps culture, Kristin’s expertise secures greater confidence amongst Senior Leaders to break down organizational silos and accelerate projects.

Kristin regularly speaks and consults on current topics including developing leaders for the digital age, women in leadership, gender parity and its impact on business, digital transformation, and impact technology and globalization have on culture, people and organizational talent strategy. The power of continuous learning and innovation are key themes across these customer discussions.

She is instrumental in two of Skillsoft’s premiere customer centric forums:

• Skillsoft Digital Council: a cross-collaborative council where executives, practitioners, and thought leaders across lines of business come together to discuss the implications digital transformation and what forward thinking tactics will accelerate transformation and contribute to a future proof strategy.

• Innovation Day: a lively, relevant, workshop among business leaders and practitioners, in collaboration with Skillsoft and industry transformation thought leaders intended to identify ways to accelerate digital readiness within your organization, demystify technology trends, improve cross-functional team performance

Kristin has served on the advisory board for the Center for Talent Reporting, is a member of various professional groups.
ABOUT SKILLSOFT

Skillsoft is a front-runner in corporate learning, delivering beautiful technology and engaging content that drives business impact for modern enterprises. Skillsoft comprises three award-winning systems that support learning, performance and success: Skillsoft learning content, the Percipio intelligent learning experience platform and the SumTotal suite for Human Capital Management.


Skillsoft is trusted by thousands of the world’s leading organizations, including 65 percent of the Fortune 500. Learn more at www.skillsoft.com.