

THE
UPSKILLING
IMPERATIVE

**5 WAYS TO MAKE
LEARNING CORE TO
THE WAY WE WORK**

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FOREWORD

In our world, competition is fierce, and the nature of the work we perform changes fast. To thrive, we need to get back to the most fundamental of all human skills: the ability to learn. Small problem: Many of us have been habituated—through our organizations, those around us, and society—to believe that learning officially ends with formal education. We're unaccustomed to the scariness (and the thrill) that comes from starting at the beginning again and again.

That's where *The Upskilling Imperative* comes in. I love Shelley Osborne's message that learning must be continuous and prioritized. I'm in absolute agreement that investing in upskilling is the path to better performance, better organizations, and more meaning in our work.

I study an incredibly diverse set of organizations around the world, from high-end boutiques and restaurants to bustling chains serving millions. Most recently, I've focused my attention on "rebel talent"—rule breakers who change the nature of their work, their organizations, and their industry, sometimes with spectacular results and sometimes less so. One key attribute shared by successful rule breakers is the willingness to courageously and continuously learn. You can't just rebel; you need to draw on skills to devise solutions and keep pushing until you succeed. Through continuous learning, we channel

our inner rebel to push past our discomfort and grow our organizations and ourselves.

I first met Shelley at an event where we were both speaking, and I was immediately struck by how Shelley drew in the audience. In her book, she does the same. As someone who studies and prizes authenticity, I love Shelley's voice. She's encouraging, pragmatic, and clear. And she's the right messenger to get us all on board with spending time every day pushing ourselves to grow.

Make no mistake: it's not easy to make learning part of our every day. Shelley's book, however, will help each of us do just that. It's full of the very best kind of advice: straightforward and supremely doable ideas that you can put into practice right away—and that will make an actual difference.

—**Francesca Gino**, Harvard Business School professor and author of *Rebel Talent* and *Sidetracked*

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Canada: Yep, the whole darn country.

PART I

**INTRODUCING THE
ERA OF CONTINUOUS
LEARNING**

Up until a few years ago, there was a simple pathway from school to work. You graduated, found a job, and never really needed to look back. For better or worse, life is no longer that simple.

The “future of work” is already here, and front-loading your education is not enough to launch a career, let alone sustain it over decades. We’ve entered the era of continuous learning, a new way of working that requires all of us to rethink how we view our jobs, our skills, and ourselves.

In Part I, we’ll talk about why now is the time to bring learning into our workplaces, better understand what it takes to learn something new, and explore why getting comfortable with change is a necessary ingredient for building a learning culture.



1

Why Are We Talking About Learning at Work?

Our lives, inside and outside of work, have changed. Automation and machine learning are infiltrating more industries and changing (or eliminating) more job functions. New technologies are evolving more quickly, challenging workers to keep up if they want to stay employed.

At the same time, employers find themselves having to devise new strategies for closing their own skills gaps, developing (and retaining) adaptable workers, supporting upskilling efforts, and preparing workers for whatever comes next. But most aren't there yet.

Meanwhile, employees find themselves in unfamiliar territory. They don't know which skills they should be learning, how to demonstrate their competencies to supervisors and hiring managers, or how to ensure they're really retaining and applying newly gained knowledge. These working professionals may be years out of school and no longer consider themselves "in learning mode." Even recent grads have fears and doubts about what it means to be lifelong learners in a work setting.

Nevertheless, these individuals will have to embrace learning, become more adaptable and proactive, and, essentially, *learn to learn*. This is what we're talking about when we refer to the upskilling imperative.

The good news: we're at our happiest and most productive when we're growing and developing!

Out with the Old

Estimates indicate that a career launched today could last as long as 50 years.¹ Meanwhile, skills stay relevant for only about five years.² Do the math and it's clear: we all need to be learning continuously or risk falling behind and having our skills become dated.

Smart companies respond to this trend by doing more to help employees navigate winding career paths and gain the skills that will keep them moving forward. Not simply a "nice" thing to do, supporting employee learning and development is a proven business driver.³

Still, learning and development (L&D) programs themselves need to evolve with the times as well. Traditional training approaches were built for a world we don't live in anymore and are even less engaging for twenty-first century workers accustomed to consuming digital content on their own terms (see Table 1.1).

But even more than modernizing the L&D experience, companies need to transform at every level into learning-driven organizations, where working and learning are inextricably linked.

TABLE 1.1 Old vs. New Training Modes

WHAT OLD TRAINING WAS LIKE	WHAT LEARNING MUST BE IN A LEARNING CULTURE
Static, quickly dated	On demand, self-driven
Scheduled, mandated by Human Resources	Intrinsic part of work
One-way push	Democratized across the organization
Completion as proxy for learning	Up-to-date, relevant content and experiences
Programmatic, episodic	Anticipatory

A True Learning Culture Is Democratized

Learning can't be reserved for only those employees of a certain rank or tenure. Consider the message that sends: only some people's growth and development are worth

investing in. That’s a surefire way to kill enthusiasm and impede results.

But everyone also has to stay accountable and has a part to play in the culture’s overall success. Table 1.2 is a snapshot of what that means at different levels. We’ll explore this idea in greater depth later in the book.

TABLE 1.2 Accountability for Learning, by Job Title

Individual Employees
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Commit to developing a growth mindset; don’t be afraid to make a mistake ▪ Bring the culture of learning to your work ▪ Share your experiences with others ▪ Advocate for your own learning needs ▪ Don’t fall for myths, e.g., you can only succeed with one “learning style”
Managers and Teams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Embrace your role as career guide for your direct reports ▪ Experiment with social learning, peer-to-peer learning, and other formats ▪ Work to develop a team with balanced skills, where individuals complement each other ▪ Give honest, constructive feedback—and receive it graciously
Organizations (Human Resources, Chief Learning Officer, Chief Executive Officer)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Put employees in the driver’s seat ▪ Hire for learning agility and growth mindset ▪ Make it safe to learn and ask for help ▪ Think like a marketer to get people excited about learning ▪ Build the infrastructure to make it work ▪ Signal the importance of learning

A High-Level View of a True Learning Culture

Learning is not something that can happen outside of work anymore. Things are moving too fast, and employee needs and wants vary too much, especially with five generations soon to be in the workforce at once.⁴ One recent survey commissioned by my company, Udemy, found that 51 percent of employees said they would quit a job where they weren't offered necessary training,⁵ while millennials in particular cited learning and development opportunities as the second-most important benefit, after salary, they expect from an employer.⁶

Historically, training initiatives have come out of the L&D or human resources (HR) departments. That needs to change. While the L&D team should serve as facilitators, individuals, managers, and organizations share responsibility for building, upholding, and participating in the learning culture.

Here are the main components for a successful learning culture, which we will explore in greater detail later in the book.

1. Develop and Foster Agile Learners

When leaders embrace change and are open and adaptable to what comes next, they position themselves and their teams for the twenty-first century workplace. As a foundation for creating a culture of learning, leaders must help their employees develop into agile learners

who embrace change and growth. To create agile employees, organizations should empower individuals to access learning resources in their moment of need, even as those needs change and evolve, and then allow people to engage with learning when, where, and how they prefer.

There are numerous elements of the learning agility puzzle—coaching workshops, career development conversations, durability principles, and the like—that can be done to support individual learning that is specific to a team, role, or stage in the employee life cycle. For leaders, it's time to think differently about their responsibility to build the organizational muscle for change and foster a workforce of agile learners.

2. Feedback Is Fuel for Learning Cultures

In a work culture that celebrates personal growth, people should feel safe to share honest, constructive feedback with colleagues. And they need the time and space to think about feedback they've received and what they can do to improve.

This isn't about telling someone what they're "bad at" and then telling them to fix it. Instead, the objective is to maximize strengths and encourage people to become their best selves. Indeed, people stop putting forth their full effort if they believe others will accept nothing less than perfection; it has to be okay to talk about our mistakes.

To be clear, this is decidedly *not* the same as going through performance reviews. For starters, learning,

feedback, and reflection coexist and should be happening all the time, not according to a company-mandated schedule.

Rather, organizations need to normalize feedback and build reflective structures into how people work. They need to provide training that helps people understand how to give and receive feedback and make room for people to reflect during their day.

In addition, individuals need to get comfortable asking for and hearing candid feedback. As I like to say, feedback is fuel! Without open channels, you won't know where you have opportunities to grow.

3. Think Like a Marketer to Drive Learning and Development

Years of poor training initiatives have caused employees to consider workplace learning a necessary evil, rather than a professional imperative. As we all know, when a product or business has a bad reputation, the first step is for marketing to swoop in and educate the market. It's time to channel that same mindset to rebrand learning and create a tangible culture around it.

Thinking like a marketer is a chance to get creative with learning, but it's also a way to take a customer-centric approach that resonates with employees' needs. The best way to retain learners is to understand their needs and wants, get creative about how you engage them in learning experiences, and market to them before, during, and after learning or training to keep them interested.

4. Put Learning into the Flow of Work

A learning culture doesn't just happen by magic; it needs to be created and nurtured in each employee. It starts with a companywide recognition that we all can and should want to continue growing; we are never "finished" with learning. Needing to learn isn't viewed as a weakness or deficiency in such an environment. On the contrary, it's accepted as a natural part of the career journey and a sign of self-awareness.

One of the most important tenets of the learning culture must be that access to professional development opportunities is democratized throughout the organization. No one should need to have a certain job title or tenure to take full advantage of available opportunities.

All employees should know they have the freedom and opportunity to learn whenever they need or want. They should also be empowered to decide what they should be learning and how.

Understanding that not everyone is a naturally self-driven learner, the organization needs to put mechanisms in place to encourage learning and make it desirable. Managers need additional training so they can help their direct reports discover their learning interests and guide them to the best resources.

5. Signal the Value of Learning

Although more and more companies now recognize the upskilling imperative, they're not exactly sure how to act on that information. Traditional training programs have left corporate leaders skeptical about investing more time

and resources into initiatives with unclear outcomes. They're looking for new approaches that see significant employee engagement and improved performance without disrupting productivity.

At the same time, individual employees know they need to gain and maintain new skills but aren't always sure where to start or how best to do it. Or, they may not work for organizations that support their learning needs or connect them to useful resources. This is a stressful place for workers with many years of employment ahead.

This book lays out the business case for why a learning culture is the answer to the many challenges posed by rapid technological change facing every company, team, and individual. From there, we will see how some real people and companies are taking action and leveraging learning as a strategic asset to:

- Close the skills gap
- Retain head count and attract new hires
- Improve engagement and job satisfaction
- Spur innovation and cross-team collaboration
- Move more quickly and nimbly



Harnessing the power of learning isn't as simple as rolling out more training modules or sending people off to a bunch of workshops. It takes careful thought, planning, and commitment. But, when done right, the culture of learning you create will yield benefits at all levels and position you and your team for future success.