

The Future of Work: Building a 21st Century Federal Workforce

A New Model for Developing Technology Capabilities

One of the biggest challenges facing the federal government is building technology skills among its workforce. Given the rate of change, and the pace of development within the technology industry, the need to continually acquire new technology skills will only accelerate as the government adopts more digital ways to deliver citizen services or streamline operations. This will put additional pressure on the government to ensure it has the programs and capability to upskill, reskill, and equip its workforce with the critical skills necessary to perform in an increasingly digital environment. Having a workforce that can rapidly learn and use emergent technologies will be the key to success for government agencies.

There is a significant technology skills gap crisis within the federal government that requires a focused effort beyond traditional hiring and development. As “critical skills” continue to evolve with the latest technology, agencies must adopt not only a robust workforce planning process which continually identifies emerging skills and capabilities, but also an effective training and workforce development capability for building those skills and reskilling their existing workforce.

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It is important to focus hiring efforts on candidates with an aptitude for acquiring technology skills, for technologists and non-technologists alike. Hiring individuals with the capability to acquire and apply new skills will build longer-term success than an approach solely focused on hiring someone with knowledge of a specific tool, technology, platform, or system that might soon be obsolete.

Focusing on a future workforce with an emphasis on soft skills and continuous learning capabilities will be essential to support the ever-increasing digitization of government services and ensure future workforces are able to fully leverage new technologies and keep pace with rapid change. Teaching certain soft skills will be far more valuable to building the capabilities that underpin employees' ability to adapt to new technologies and will result in a more flexible and adaptable workforce.

There are several key skills that will build a robust, future-ready workforce that go beyond the traditional view of competencies for technology. These include building a threshold for ambiguity, demonstrating resilience, maintaining flexibility, possessing a capacity to adapt, and embodying self-efficacy. These skills can be developed, and they form the necessary foundation to establishing a learning culture that can support the federal workforce in taking on new challenges, whether it be pivoting to the latest technology- or non-technology-related work.



The Importance of Soft Skills

Organizations should focus on investing in developing “soft” emotional intelligence (EQ)-related skills, which determine the ease with which people can learn and adapt to new technology, specifically:

- **A threshold for ambiguity.** Future-ready employees should have confidence in their own ability to deal with unexpected situations effectively.
- **Resilience.** Resilient employees are aware of their personal strengths and use them regularly in their work to overcome obstacles or difficult situations.
- **Flexibility.** Effective employees adapt quickly when introduced to new technologies or are placed in unfamiliar learning situations.
- **Adaptability.** Nimble employees adapt their behavior to operate well under unexpected circumstances or work well with different types of people.
- **Self-efficacy.** Confident employees are able to advocate on behalf of themselves for a specific position or project, especially when they feel they can successfully carry out a certain task.

The Future of Work: Building and Sustaining Technology Skills

Reports show that IT skills are likely to be outdated within two and a half years, as technology rapidly evolves. This means employees and organizations have less and less time to learn and become adept at a given technology before the next technology replaces the current one. This phenomenon is known as the half-life of skills.¹

As technology becomes more sophisticated and intelligent, it can become an extension of the human. To facilitate this, the federal government must shift its focus when it comes to learning new technologies. Rather than solely teaching employees a new IT skill, tool, or technology, the government should be making investments to develop employees with an aptitude towards learning and creating an organizational culture which supports that learning and growth. Focusing workforce planning and development efforts on these “enabling” skills will result in more highly engaged, invested employees.

Building these five skills (listed on the left) into the federal government’s workforce planning efforts, and embedding them in the organizational culture and expectations, makes pivoting to rapidly learn or implement the latest tool or technology much easier for the employee and the organization. Arguably, the most challenging part of technology implementation is gaining employee buy-in and adoption. Having a resilient, agile workforce that is willing to learn and adapt can make these changes far smoother, especially as technology implementations occur more frequently in the future of work. Additionally, developing an agile workforce will free up the employees and the organization to prioritize uniquely human skills, such as inspiring others, managing complex negotiations, and being empathetic.

Fostering a Learning Culture

To achieve this agile workforce vision, the organization must create a robust learning culture where a growth (or an open, and curious) mindset is ingrained as employees independently and proactively seek out learning and development (L&D) opportunities and team members collectively work towards achieving mission and goals.² Employees in a “learning culture” are eager to learn, are encouraged to do so, and apply what they’ve learned to their role, the organization at large, and their interactions with peers internally.³ Building a strong learning culture and community has been linked to lower turnover, increased knowledge transfers, and higher job satisfaction within organizations.⁴

This learning culture coincides perfectly with increasing expectations from employees in recent years for more L&D opportunities from their employers to help progress their careers (either for the roles they’re in now or the future). Millennial and Gen Z workplace expectations include diversity, equity, and inclusion, and employers that are socially aware, emphasize mental health and work/life balance, and provide purpose and impact. Beyond that, they also demand professional development.⁵ Nearly 50% of millennials and Gen Z prioritize employers that provide opportunities to develop leadership and managerial skills, and one-third cite a lack of career advancement opportunities as a reason to leave their jobs.⁶ Millennials and Gen Z are eager to lead from the front and expect the support of their employers, via L&D and training, to develop these abilities.⁷

The federal government is still working to strike the right balance in cultivating meaningful and reciprocally beneficial L&D opportunities, allowing employees to curate their own learning while complying with mandatory learning. By creating a thriving learning culture, the federal government will build the necessary skills required “in-house,” within its existing workforce, and will spend less time (and money) seeking candidates outside the organization or engaging external consultants to fill critical skill gaps. Over time, this will have the additional benefit of increasing the effectiveness of the federal government and building a workforce skilled and adaptable to new technologies.

The Employee Experience: Why It Matters

Building a strong learning culture is key to creating a positive and impactful employee experience. Numerous studies correlate the number of L&D opportunities an organization offers with ancillary improvements to employee experience. Overall, creating a positive employee experience is good for attracting and retaining strong talent and for maintaining high employee engagement. It also leads to more impactful organizational outcomes, such as a positive customer (or citizen, for the federal government) experience.⁸

When employees feel they can thrive, this improves customer/citizen satisfaction and metrics, engagement, and brand (department) reputation.⁹ Overall, when agencies prioritize their employees and build a positive employee experience which emphasizes a learning culture, it will show in both organizational qualitative and quantitative customer/citizen experience results.

Implementing a New Workforce Model

Fundamentally, the future of work has created myriad requirements for the federal government. Using a future-focused approach to meeting these evolving needs and building a robust employee experience will enable the federal government to have an engaged workforce with the requisite skills to succeed. This transformation is about holistic behavior and cultural change at all levels of the organization and requires an evidence-based approach to achieve it. Guidehouse suggests a three-pronged approach to building a future-focused learning culture:

- 1 Focus on the skills the organization will require and prioritize in the future**
Conduct a skills gap assessment to determine which digital and soft skills the organization currently has, and which it will need to develop in the future. The organization's skill requirements will depend on its mission, strategic technology plans, and operational needs. From this assessment, ensure the skills the organization is building match the needs and requirements of the organization going forward.
- 2 Craft a learning culture specific to the organization**
Analyze your organization's existing learning and development programs, in terms of employees' perceptions of training opportunities and the training programs' levels of success. From this analysis, optimize the training approach to ensure that the learning culture you're creating is designed specifically for the needs of the organization.
- 3 Emphasize the importance of employee experience**
Work closely with employees to craft an employee experience that delivers on their expectations and preferences for personal development. Create metrics to measure the impact to employee satisfaction and customer experience.

Sustaining the Model

By re-baselining around future skills, crafting a tailor-made learning culture, and driving the right employee experience, organizations will have the insights necessary to develop a thriving, continuous L&D culture that promotes a threshold for ambiguity, resiliency, flexibility, adaptability, and self-efficacy within their employees and organizational culture, rather than simply emphasizing technology skill attainment. In turn, organizations will see exponential improvements in their employee experience and customer/citizen experience and be better prepared to adapt to the ever-increasing pace of change and digitization of citizen service delivery.

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Building and sustaining organizational technology skills through a thriving learning culture is one of the building blocks of workforce planning. Guidehouse can support you through the entire workforce planning life cycle. Guidehouse offers solutions around human capital strategy and policy, organizational design, workforce planning and analytics, HR service delivery strategy, employee experience and engagement, performance management, learning and development, and leadership coaching for our clients. You can learn more about Guidehouse's approach to organizational effectiveness and human capital strategy development [here](#).

Sources

¹IBM, "[Skills Transformation For The 2021 Workplace](#)," IBM Training and Skills Blog, last modified 7 December 2020.

²Society for Human Resource Management, "[How to Create a Learning Culture](#)," SHRM Magazine, last modified 1 May 2015.

³Ibid.

⁴Toby Egan, Baiyin Yang & Kenneth Bartlett, "[The Effects of Organizational Learning Culture and Job Satisfaction on Motivation to Transfer Learning and Turnover Intention](#)," Human Resources Development Quarterly, 15, 3 (2004): 279.

⁵Mark Perna, "[5 Ways the Satisfying the Gen Z Workforce Can Help Every Other Workforce Generation](#)," Forbes, last modified 12 May 2022.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Robert Vance, [Employee Engagement and Commitment: A guide to understanding, measuring and increasing engagement in your organization](#), First Edition. (USA: SHRM Foundation, 2006), 23.

⁹Ibid.

About Guidehouse

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