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TREND REPORT

From Roles to Skills: The New North Star for Learning & Development

You've seen the World Economic Forum's research: nearly 40% of employees' current skills will be outdated by 2030. And that's causing problems now — 63% of employers say skills gaps are their biggest barrier to business transformation.

L&D leaders already know skills matter. The real 2026 challenge is making them the default lens for every program decision, stakeholder discussion, and learning request your team handles.

What It Means To Make Skills the North Star

Making skills the North Star for learning and development means that capabilities — not degrees or job titles — guide decisions around what to build, who to develop, and where to invest.

When skills lead the way, your L&D team:



Creates targeted training: Build learning programs around the specific skills your teams need to succeed, making training more relevant and effective.



Supports career growth: Map out clear career paths for employees by focusing on the skills they need to grow and be successful in their next role at your company, not just their current job titles.



Makes smarter talent decisions: Use skills data to decide whether it's better to train current employees (build) or hire new ones (buy), so your talent investments are strategic.

Untapped Skills: Your Internal Marketplace

Nearly 70% of orgs are planning to **pivot to skills-based hiring** — or already have — but only about one-third are building internal talent marketplaces to match.

Relying on just one approach isn't enough in a rapidly changing environment.

To stay agile, companies need to:

- Use skills data to find the right external talent.
- Surface and redeploy internal talent based on real capabilities.
- Build an internal marketplace that makes existing skills visible, highlights gaps, and supports proactive workforce planning.



4 Actions L&D Can Take Now

Start small by embedding skills into your existing workflows and conversations. No major investments or full-scale transformations required — yet.

1. Pick Your Priority Skills

Narrow down 10-15 skills that align with 2026 business goals, like AI fluency, critical thinking, change leadership, or collaboration. Start by reviewing your company’s strategic priorities, then speak with HR and two or three business leaders in key functions.

Ask them, “Which capabilities will make or break our goals this year?” Document their top three to five picks, then combine that your priority list. This ensures you’re solving real, urgent problems, not chasing hypotheticals or wishlists.

2. Tag What You Already Have

Map your existing training courses and development programs to the priority skills you identified. Create a simple spreadsheet with three columns: “Priority Skill,” “Current Coverage,” and “Action Needed.” List your 10-15 skills down the left column, then audit every course, workshop, e-learning module, and development program against them. Be honest: Does this leadership workshop actually get results, or is it generic inspiration?

You’ll quickly spot gaps — critical areas with no coverage — and redundancies — multiple trainings for the same skill. Next, deprioritize low-value duplicates, retire clutter, and flag genuine gaps to address. Then you can make a data-backed case to leadership about where to reinvest.

3. Add Skills to Every Conversation

If you get generic requests like “leadership training,” shift to specific skills language that bridges L&D, hiring, and performance. Update your intake form for new requests to include, “Which 1–3 skills should this build?” Train managers to say “AI prompt engineering” instead of “digital skills,” or “problem-solving” instead of “soft skills.”

Make skills the common language across the business to create clarity, accountability, and alignment:



Hiring: HR adds skills to job descriptions and interview guides.



Performance: Managers tie goals and reviews to priority skill development.



Promotions: Show employees exactly which capabilities unlock their next role.

4. Launch Lightweight Skills Visibility

Choose a pilot team, like sales or product, to start gaining visibility into your priority skills. Use a short survey asking employees to rate their proficiency on your 10-15 key skills, then have managers validate or adjust those ratings based on recent performance.

You can turn the results into a skills heatmap, a color coded grid showing proficiency levels across the pilot group. Green for strengths, yellow for developing, red for critical gaps. Share it with leadership to spark immediate conversations about skills needs and internal talent allocation. You’ll quickly prove the value of skills data and build buy-in for bigger efforts, like investing in a learning platform.

Make Long-Term Plans for L&D

Once you've built early momentum by testing skills based L&D and proving its value, expand skills into core processes to make the change permanent.

Build a Comprehensive Skills Framework

Partner with HR and talent acquisition to clearly define 50–75 skills in three categories:

- **Core skills** e.g., problem-solving, collaboration, time management
- **Leadership skills** e.g., change communication, decision-making, strategic thinking
- **Role-specific skills** e.g., AI prompt engineering for marketers; patient charting for healthcare professionals; risk analysis for finance roles

Hold workshops with stakeholders to align on terms, proficiency levels (beginner/advanced/expert), and validation methods. Now, everyone can speak the same language across the employee lifecycle.

Embed Skills in Performance and Mobility

Bring skills into everyday business, not just your LMS. Partner with managers and HR to integrate priority skills into how you evaluate, promote, and hire.

- **Update Performance Goals:** Set clear targets like, “Demonstrate advanced proficiency in Data Visualization by Q3.”
- **Refresh Job Postings:** Highlight essential skills over years of experience to open more doors for internal talent.
- **Reframe Career Conversations:** Make promotions about meeting specific skill milestones, not just seniority.

Design Skills-Based Learning Paths

Instead of generic course catalogs, create focused learning journeys that help employees master the skills their roles demand and the business needs.

Start with a few critical roles and build learning paths:

- **Map Priority Skills:** Identify three to five must have skills for the job.
- **Set Milestones:** Define what proficiency and progress look like for each skill, from beginner or entry-level to expert or senior.
- **Curate Content:** Offer a combination of microlearning, peer mentoring, and real projects to keep development practical and engaging.

Implement a Skills-First LMS or LXP

A true skills-based approach requires more than spreadsheets. Use a learning management system (LMS) or learning experience platform (LXP) that can:

- **Automate Personalization:** Deliver targeted content based on each learner's skill gaps
- **Centralize Skills Data:** Track skill proficiency and progress in real time
- **Integrate Seamlessly:** Is part of a talent management system for managing the entire employee lifecycle, from hiring to performance, for smooth data flow

The right platform saves time, increases visibility, and keeps your team focused on building essential skills.

Ready To Lead With Skills? Start Today

You don't have to transform your entire L&D landscape overnight. Meaningful change starts with just one action. Get started by choosing one skills-focused action to implement this quarter — just one shift in your existing process. Then, set your sights on a bigger step for next year.

Build skills-first, future-ready learning programs with our L&D Playbook.

[Get the Playbook](#)



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