



Are Learning Equity Issues Affecting Your Company?

Rather than prioritizing skills gaps, first address opportunity gaps.

BY JD DILLON

Does every employee in your organization—regardless of role, tenure, location, or identity—have an equitable opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills? If an honest assessment of your workplace learning culture led you to answer no, keep reading. If you arrived at a fast yes, consider a few additional factors:

- Does your organization exclude certain groups from learning programs due to expected high turnover?
- Does the depth and availability of learning programs vary based on where a person works, such as in the office, at home, or in a frontline location?

- Does your company use training as a reward, thereby restricting development to top performers and perceived favorites?
- Do required programs, such as onboarding and compliance training, make up the bulk of some audiences' formal development, leaving them to figure out the rest on their own?
- Do development opportunities require access to specific technology that is not available within every employee's workflow?

When you add those considerations to your learning equity assessment, is your answer still yes?

The skills dilemma

The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the importance of skill development in and out of the workplace. According to Axonify and Arlington Research's 2020 *State of Frontline Employee Training* report, 46 percent of frontline employees, who are usually required to work on location, took on new tasks or moved into different roles. Overall, most people had to rapidly acquire new skills just so they could do their jobs during the past year.

The skills conversation represents a critical bridge between the talent development function and management. In organizations where management has not prioritized learning, leaders often see training as a check-the-box activity that employees should complete as quickly as possible, without regard for learning science, so people can focus on their work. However, managers inherently know they need the right people with the right skills to reach their operational goals, remain competitive, and overcome disruption.

Plus, the skills conversation extends beyond learning and into larger organizational narratives such as talent acquisition, mobility, and management. That shared understanding, along with the introduction of technology enabled by artificial intel-

ligence, is pushing employers to quickly adopt skills-first mindsets.

Adopting a skills-based approach makes sense. But once a company prioritizes the critical skills its employees must develop to be successful, what happens next? If only 17 percent of executives say their workers are "very ready to adapt, reskill and assume new roles" according to Deloitte researchers, it's unlikely that most employers already have the necessary infrastructure in place to rapidly address employee development needs.

A chicken-egg situation

Have gaps developed because employers failed to recognize the importance of skills within their operational strategies? Or has an unequitable approach to skill development failed to keep pace with the changing workplace needs? Employers must address both issues to make sure employees are ready to face their next big challenge.

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Skills gaps are, at least in part, created by learning inequities. They're an effect, not a cause—a downstream result of a fractured TD perspective. That is why, during a time when organizational learning peaked in engagement as a result of pandemic-initiated change, 46 percent of employees reported reduced upskilling and reskilling opportunities, according to Degreed's *The State of Skills 2021* report.

A company's top list of critical skills is going to change over time, but every entry on the list will require a right-fit human experience to support targeted development. Therefore, closing skills gaps begins with restoring learning equity.

Five opportunity gaps

Every learning culture is unique. Some organizations prioritize learning, which helps them provide more equitable learning experiences for all employees. Other companies overlook or poorly support

learning cultures and, as a result, do not provide equitable opportunities. While TD teams may not directly use the term *learning equity*, they are likely familiar with the related challenges that negatively affect their cultures.

The mindset gap represents how an organization—everyone from frontline employees to senior management—views the role of learning within the workplace. Do they see learning as a critical business capability or just something people are required to do?

The priority gap reflects how a company prioritizes (or doesn't prioritize) learning as part of the everyday workflow. Are workers permitted the time, capacity, and autonomy to focus on their development, or does it tend to get sidelined by the next business priority?

The inclusion gap refers to how effectively an organization includes everyone—regardless of role, tenure, background, demographic, education, or

location—in its learning strategy. Does every employee have consistent access to meaningful growth opportunities, or is development limited to select groups?

The reality gap explores the alignment between an employee's day-to-day context and the company's learning strategy. Can employees experience training during the time available in the busy workday, or do they have to adjust how they do their jobs to fit in training?

The digital gap measures how broadly a company applies technology to enable learning experiences that meet the entire workforce's unique needs. Can everyone access skill development opportunities using the technology available within their workflows, or are learning activities only available to those with specific technology resources?

Those challenges aren't new. However, organizational leaders usually discuss the challenges in isolation without consider-

ation for their collective impact on the employee experience and organizational agility. This skills conversation is TD's chance to address the problems in service of restoring overall learning equity.

Adopting a systems approach

As the modern learning ecosystem framework that I developed conveys, every employee needs (and deserves) six elements when it comes to how organizations can support them at work:

- Timely, consistent, reliable communication
- Training on core job knowledge and skills
- Access to on-demand performance support
- Ongoing practice and reinforcement
- Persistent, actionable coaching and feedback
- Opportunities to develop and apply new skills

Unfortunately, those needs are difficult for employers to meet through a programmatic approach to TD. It takes a lot of effort and resources to build, deploy, and manage learning programs at scale. As a result, TD teams may design many programs as generic, one-size-fits-all solutions and overlook large swathes of the workforce.

Restoring learning equity requires a fundamental mindset shift. Rather than relying on programs as the basic unit of learning, TD professionals must adopt a systems approach. That includes installing consistent, scalable channels and tactics that fit within the workflow, which TD teams can deploy to address any and all skill development needs. For example, if an organization implements a knowledge base that frontline and office-based employees can access in the flow of work, it can then use the same knowledge base as the basis for all future learning solutions—even those that include more traditional, programmatic methods like coursework. Such a repeatable, scalable approach adds a foundational layer of consistency to the employee experience, thereby improving learning equity.

Focus on personas, not roles

Technology is essential to closing opportunity gaps, especially within distributed workforces. However, overcome the urge to oversimplify the learning technology ecosystem. Providing a single front door for all digital learning may sound like a great way to simplify the employee experience (on paper at least), but providing equal access to development resources does not always result in an equitable learning experience. That is because, while employees may work in

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the same organization, their day-to-day experiences differ.

For example, a professional salesperson, marketing manager, and delivery driver do their jobs differently and therefore require different support experiences. The knowledge and skill requirements of their roles are a secondary consideration, because those factors are likely to change over time.

Instead, to provide equitable learning that will help those employees keep pace, architect digital experiences that fit within the realities of how they do their work. In some cases, different types of workers may use the same tools and content. In others, employees may require unique platforms, devices, and resources that better fit their day-to-day realities.

Restoring learning equity does not mean an organization must provide a unique set of development tools for every role. After all, large companies can have tens of thousands of job codes but limited TD resources. Rather than focus on job titles, craft learning experiences to fit common personas.

A warehouse worker and a cashier do different jobs—one is behind the scenes while the other is customer-facing. Yet they share common attributes, including managed workflows, limited schedule control, and task orientation. Thus, they

may benefit from similar learning tactics such as microlearning and reinforcement activities that they can complete in a few minutes during each shift.

Opportunities

Restoring learning equity is crucial to building a disruption-proof learning culture. Before going all in on a skills strategy, take a hard look at your learning ecosystem and challenge yourself to adopt more agile, scalable, consistent practices.

Educate stakeholders. Help workers from the C-suite to the front line recognize the value of workplace learning by sharing real-world stories. Demonstrate the impact of new learning methods and technologies to expand their perspective and connect TD with business and human agility.

Go to the audience. Apply a persona-based approach to solution design. Ground your work in the audience's day-to-day reality instead of your own.

Shift from equality to equity. Stop building one-size-fits-all training that doesn't fit anyone. Elevate learning equity by designing experiences that provide everyone with the development they really need.

Apply technology with purpose. Don't go hunting for a technology unicorn that can solve every problem. Instead, apply a diverse tech stack in which every tool has a clear purpose and value.

A business can only transform as fast as its people can learn. To overcome the skills gap, employees need equitable opportunities to make learning a real part of their everyday jobs.

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