



HOW-TO SKILLS FIRST

UPSKILL AND RESKILL: LEADING A SKILLS-FIRST CULTURE

Lessons from Ginni Rometty, Former CEO of IBM

Inspire leadership to change their mindset around learning and development programs to achieve long term goals through economic uncertainty.

- What to consider when **performing a skills gap assessment**
- **The limits to your HRIS system** when it comes to a skills-based culture
- Identifying the need to **change your recruitment, hiring, and operations** based on skills-based achievements

THE URGENCY

[World Economic Forum's 2025 Future of Jobs Report](#) found 59% of employees will likely need to reskill or upskill over the next five years to stay at work.

THE CHALLENGE

70% of organizations struggled to build workforce skills during that time. CHROs realize they need to "advance on their workforces' continuous (and urgent) learning needs," from [2025 Priorities and Predictions report](#).

Why a Skills-Based Approach?

As we enter 2025, work for all industries is continuing to advance at a rapid pace. With the speed at which AI is advancing, tasks and roles are being reshaped on all levels. The greater challenge is that the need for these skills is mixed with increase cost of living, inflation, and concerns of a looming recession. It can seem like a seemingly impossible task—how can you get transparency for your executive team on gaps in these business-critical skills? How do you track and validate these competencies over time? Can your HRIS help?

Ginni Rometty, former CEO of IBM, shares her lessons from leading a national and global strategy to bridge the skills gap called SkillFirst which challenged overcredentialed and opened access to grow IBM's workforce by providing new pathways to an associate's degree.

Coupled with mentorship and apprenticeship programs, those who had a willingness to learn, succeeded. But without understanding how your business intends to modernize, upskilling employees or giving them opportunities doesn't help the company or the employee.



Generation Gaps



Gen Z is projected to make up one-third of the workforce by next year

Gen Z possesses some soft skills, like their natural strengths in empathy, fairness and respect. While they may need development in specific workplace skills like conflict resolution, their openness to growth makes them excellent candidates for training.

Why Invest?

A skills-first approach is a talent strategy to building people, not just buying them. This is often what most managers miss – the drive to develop their people. Top performers want to advance. All employees want to be a part of something. HR is at the intersection between business priorities and the workforce, helping to support managers with the tools needed to keep talent engaged and employed.

Skills Based Assessment

Employees: 1-49

Steps to Perform Skills Assessment

Perform Assessment

1. What are your business goals for 1-5 years?
2. What are the trends in your industry?
3. What skills do you need to keep up with those trends?

Perform Analysis to Find Your Gaps

1. Identify the skills in each role

- Resource: [O*NET Resource Center](#)

2. What skills do you need?

- Resource: Use [this checklist](#) to glean insights and add variations to the standard skills provided in a job description.
- Download [this skills matrix](#) for your managers.



3. Determine your budget for learning and development

- Tip: Mentorship and apprenticeship programs inside your company can be an easy way to upskill!

4. What does your workforce want?

- Resource: [Use this survey](#) to find out more from employees.



5. What's available for your teams?

- Fellowship/apprentice
- Mentorship
- Peer to peer
- E-learning: LinkedIn Learning, Coursera, Udemy, etc.
- Video conferences
- Online certifications

The Problem: Limits to HRIS Systems in a Skills Based Model

Employees: 51-500+

When transforming to a skills-based model, it's important to understand that HRIS systems are automation tools meant to standardize. This means they only identify high-level skills associated with the role, which doesn't include the many nuances of your industry, specific worksite requirements, equipment, or additional responsibilities.

Frequency of Assessment

HRIS systems are great for annual performance reviews, but technical skills evolve, the nature of our roles expand, and every department from operations to training teams have key insight into the skills that are lacking for employees.

More Data is Needed

Technical and competency management requires greater detail. The skills group associated with each job location, equipment, customer, department, etc. could overwhelm the manager and exclude the information you need to see to accurately assess your skills gap. However, combined with additional data points specific to these nuances, it's easier to see opportunities and growth possibilities within the same job role.

Managers to Own the Process

Managing technical competencies are moving at a pace that is difficult for HR or an HRIS to keep up with. A skills-based company requires a flexible approach to how skills are assigned and developed. Not every employee needs skills training on the same set of skills, so managers need the ability to assign supplemental training based on the specifics of their role.

Manufacturing at Scale

"Machine operator" in manufacturing defines salary and position but which machine is the individual competent for? Do they complete other work outside of their standard tasks listed in the job description? We take on additional responsibilities as our tenure grows.

Kahuna | [Standardize Manufacturing Training, Skills, and Operational Processes](#)

"Managers should have the ability to create skills based on specific localities or move employees to different skill groups within a job to help close the skills-gap, cross train the workforce and prepare for turnover in a dynamic environment."

Kahuna, [Skills & Competency Management SaaS platform](#)

SkillsFirst

How to Scale Big Ideas

Employees: 10,000+

SkillsFirst, a hiring and training movement used to upskill IBM, was created by Ginni Rometty, Former CEO of IBM.

IBM SkillsBuild is a free education program focused on underrepresented communities in tech, that helps adult learners, and high school and university students and faculty, develop valuable new skills and access career opportunities. The program includes an online platform that is complemented by customized practical learning experiences delivered in collaboration with a global network of partners.

The open version of IBM SkillsBuild is an online platform that offers over 1,000 courses in 19 languages on cybersecurity, data analysis, cloud computing, and many other technical disciplines – as well as in workplace skills such as Design Thinking. Most important, participants can earn IBM-branded digital credentials that are recognized by the market.

Apprenticeships

1k

IBM has hired roughly 1,000 apprenticeships through its U.S. program.

Graduates

90%

90% of graduates become full-time employees.

Upskilling

30 mil

Skilling 30 million people globally by 2030. Closing the skills gap is the biggest opportunity of the decade.

Expand Learning

1.72 million

1.72 million students and job seekers worldwide have joined IBM SkillsBuild to expand their learning.

Overcredentialing

SkillsFirst is a catch-all term that refers to valuing the skills a person has rather than just the degrees they have. More specifically, a SkillsFirst approach to learning, hiring, and advancement means that employers source and select employees based on what people know, their expertise, not just based on their degree or higher education credentials.

SkillsFirst hiring creates more upwardly mobile middle-class jobs and careers. For people mid-career, SkillsFirst makes new paths possible. For employers, SkillsFirst provides access to larger and more inclusive talent pools, without sacrificing performance, and invites more diverse workforces. In a SkillsFirst world, skills, not just degrees, equate to professional accomplishment and are a prerequisite for advancement.

Companies with true learning cultures attract and retain more talent, increase engagement, spark innovation, and are more competitive.

“We embrace a lifetime of continuous learning, which is so important in an era where many tech skills become obsolete or less relevant in three to five years.”

Ginni Rometty, Former IBM CEO

Building belief

What it means to being in service of...

To build new skills, it was imperative for Rometty to learn how to build belief in her workforce. She says in her book, Good Power, “You can’t expect people to learn and develop without building belief in themselves.”

To build belief is to get voluntary, eager buy-in from employees. The opposite of building belief is ordering people to do something they don’t buy into and expecting them to perform as if they did.

The Manager’s Role

Helping people grow and build belief in themselves is a key part to a manager’s role. More specifically, a SkillsFirst approach to learning, hiring, and advancement means that employers source and select employees based on what people know, their expertise, not just based on their degree or higher education credentials.

“We can choose to inspire, not force people to willingly embrace change, and take part in creating it. More than once, exercising my influence versus authority helped convince others to embrace a new reality.”

Ginni Rometty, Former IBM CEO

Allow them to make decisions

The authority to make decisions. Employees do better when you trust and have belief in their process.

Spotlight success

Rometty often brought success stories of loyal and dedicated employees that excelled in the program on stage. Everyone listening in the audience heard people’s experiences firsthand. This personalized the issue, helping to build belief in a SkillsFirst world, one audience at a time.

Give them the tools

Mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities create learning opportunities for employee to develop new skills.

Co-create a new reality

We often need to hold the vision of the future while others can’t see it yet. Rometty says, “Paint reality and give hope.”

Assess talents

Put them in positions where they will use their skills to be challenged and grow. Rometty matched consultants with clients that would utilize their skills and put them in positions to be challenged.

Find the opportunities

Building followership doesn’t just happen through rah-rah words and inspiring speeches. Emotional connection is essential to spark belief, but belief is sealed with information, honesty, and clarity about a situation and the path forward. Facts and feelings. Bridging emotion and execution is the tension of building belief.

Being a steward of the company

What it means to being in service of...

Co-create a new way of working. What needs to change might be your product, service, or the path you take to get there. How do we create that change?

For an individual, the “how” refers to established work habits—such as collaboration, initiative, or punctuality. For a company, the “how” is the approach to getting work done, encompassing leadership, processes, behaviors, and, most importantly, the collective talent, knowledge, and skills of the workforce. In essence, the “how” is culture in action.

To truly serve people, the approach must be tailored to their needs. They must be engaged, with solutions that support both their success and the company’s goals.

Co-Creating with People

How do you ask employees to take on new responsibilities as the business grows? Who is best suited to step into these roles, expanding their skills and capabilities? Consider who is in the strongest position and how you can mentor and support their growth. When making bold moves, who on your team can you bring along? AI and new business ventures are significant leaps—*who will rise to the challenge?*

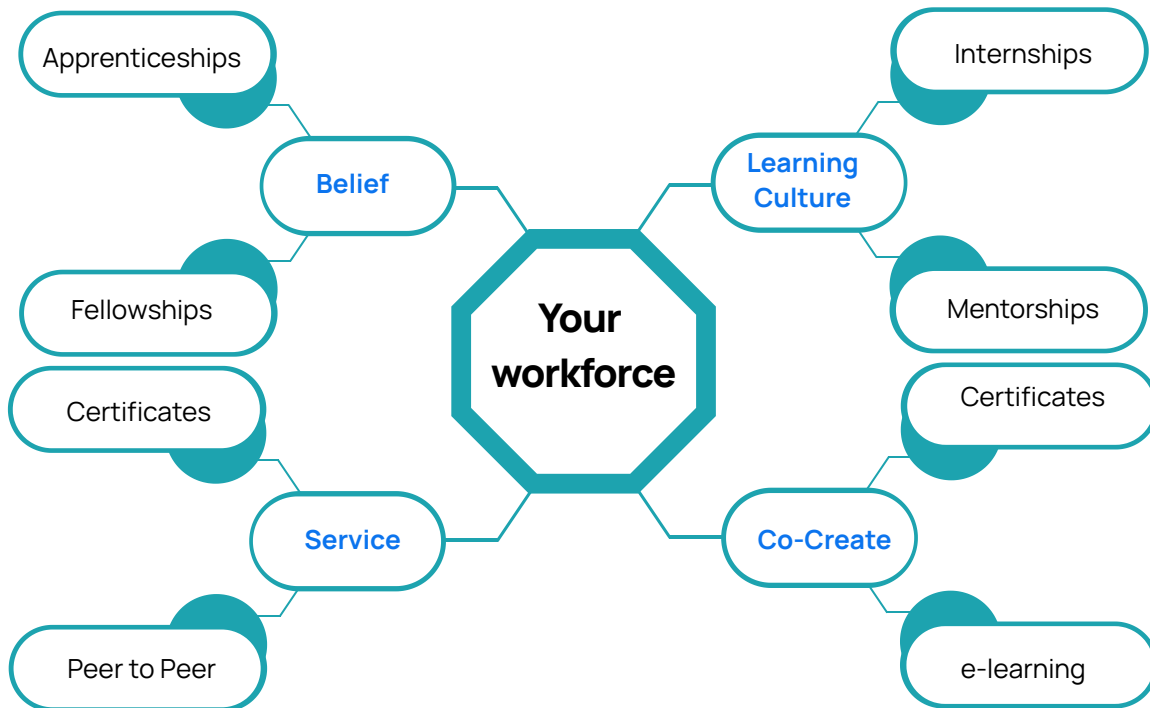
What a company does is just as crucial as how it operates. Culture matters. Skill-building and development must be woven into everyday work—it’s not an add-on, but a way of operating. To co-create a new way of working, you must equip employees with the right processes and tools to succeed.

“Being CEO was not about some title I had achieved; it was about all the people for whom I was now in service of.”

Ginni Rometty, Former IBM CEO

Summary

In a SkillsFirst world, employers become “builders” versus just “buyers” of talent. They invent or partner for their own educational programs, adapt courses from other companies, and guide their people through learning journeys, giving employees time for formal classes, experiential learning, and informal exposure to fresh ideas and ways of thinking.



A learning culture should permeate your recruiting, hiring, operations, and management practices. For this reason, leaders must have buy-in, dedicated to developing their teams into the best versions of themselves for themselves, their families, and for the business.

“For employers, a culture of continuous learning was the ultimate competitive advantage.”

Ginni Rometty, Former IBM CEO

