

4 trends in employee skills development and training you need to know for 2021

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Everything changed in 2020. Seemingly overnight, companies were forced to abandon their offices, and their staff had to adapt to the challenges of working from home. More unfortunate were those whose jobs were wiped out as their companies downsized or shut down entirely.



Image source: Getty Images

Those that survived the year with their jobs intact should not, however, rest on their laurels. If nothing else, 2020 underlined the importance of workers staying flexible and reskilling themselves as the business environment around them changes.

But that's not the only thing that changed. Companies also have an increasingly wide array of options available when it comes to reskilling their employees. Powered by technology, these options won't disappear going into 2021, even as Covid-19 vaccines are rolled out and life returns to something more like a pre-pandemic normal.

Here are the trends that will shape employee skills development and training in 2021.

1. Digital learning continues its acceleration

In 2019, online learning was already a [nearly-US\\$200-billion industry](#) and was projected to be worth \$320-billion by 2025. Thanks to the events of 2020, we may reach that second figure sooner than anticipated.

With physical events cancelled and businesses having to meet their skills development targets on smaller budgets, many turned to online training and certification. While it may have been a necessity in 2020, employees and management alike have been sold on its benefits. As well as reduced travel, accommodation, and overall costs, these include less time away from the office and families. All of which, in turn, results in happier, more productive employees who are still gaining the skills they need to thrive in the evolving business environment.

It's also important to note, however, that digital learning will accelerate pace at which we do business. Managers will have to keep up with this pace and ensure that their employees are empowered to do so too.

Important for their ability to do so, is the fact that digital learning allows employees to essentially design their own futures, rather than sticking to a prescribed curriculum.

2. Graduates and the multi-generational workplace

Similarly, university students who were already comfortable doing most activities online have been forced to complete their studies online. As these students graduate and enter the workforce, they'll expect their further development to carry on along the same path.

For businesses looking to hire the cream of the graduate crop, offering opportunities for online training and development will be an important recruitment and retention tool.

These graduates will only add to the complexity of a multi-generational workplace. Business needs to embrace this change, with managers practising liquid leadership. More specifically, they'll need to equip workers of all generations to be adaptable, practise transparency, and play to their own strengths as well as those of the organisation.

3. Up-to-the-minute skills on top of degrees

While the notion that university degrees are becoming irrelevant is somewhat overblown, it is worth noting some of the big changes when it comes to corporate qualifications. Some of the world's biggest companies ([including Google and Apple](#)) have dropped their degree requirements and are offering their own training certifications. Some of Google's courses are [as short as six months](#), which may be tempting to people who don't have the time and resources for a three-year degree.

That said, degrees do still offer critical skills, especially when it comes to opening people's minds to new ways of thinking. There's also a reason some of the most popular digital courses come from established institutions.

What is clear is that, in a constantly evolving business environment, a degree might not be enough anymore. What's required are 'just in time' skillsets, which equip workers to thrive in the world of tomorrow. It's also worth noting that while degrees offer theoretical skills, they don't always equip workers to deal with the practical tools needed for business.

4. Reskilling becomes a state focus

There has always been a dichotomy between South Africa's massive unemployment rate and its overwhelming skills shortage. But we're not the only country with a skills shortage and it doesn't only have an impact at the macro-level.

According to research from McKinsey, [94% of the UK workforce](#) lacks the skills they need to do their jobs adequately in 2030. South Africa likely suffers from a similar skills shortage when it comes to unfilled jobs but also among the actively employed.

While there are already strong incentives for companies to reskill their employees (reskilling results in more productive employees and increased revenue), it will likely become a priority for countries looking to fuel economic recovery in 2021. South Africa already has the National Skills Development Levy, but it will likely need an even greater concentration on building vital skills if it wants to build a better, more economically-resilient business environment.

Moreover, government needs to realise that those skills are always changing. The refrain needs to be “learn -unlearn-relearn” and everyone in, and about to enter, the workforce needs to be equipped with the ability to embrace that mindset.

Constant change

If 2020 taught us anything, it's that events can both trigger an acceleration of existing trends and completely change the prevailing business environment. There will likely be shifts and changes even within the trends outlined above.

It's imperative that businesses stay on top of them and, more importantly, allow their employees to do so too.

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