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Foster a Culture of Agile Learning to Upskill IT Employees Faster

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Initiatives: CIO Leadership of Technology Talent, Culture and DEI

Today's hypercompetitive labor market has increased the price tag of IT skills, heightening the need for the rapid upskilling of IT employees. Telling employees they need to learn is not enough; CIOs must foster a culture of agile learning to unlock critical skills supporting business objectives.

Overview

Key Findings

- A shortage of talent remains one of the most significant barriers to digital acceleration success; upskilling and reskilling current employees are enterprises' top strategies for filling critical talent gaps.
- New and different skills are needed, with the total number of skills required for a single job increasing at 5.4% annually. In addition, 33% of the skills present in an average job posting in 2019 will not be needed by 2024.
- Building a productive learning culture is key to ensuring that employees have the skills required to execute organizations' strategic objectives. However, half of surveyed L&D executives say their organizations' learning culture is primarily "check the box" or "compliance driven."
- Traditional training is too slow, expensive and location-centric to respond to future-of-work shifts. Agile learning practices provide a faster, more affordable and more effective alternative.

Recommendations

CIOs tasked with developing future-ready technology talent should:

- Make learning a core organizational value in IT by communicating a compelling culture change narrative that emphasizes a shift from an ad hoc to an agile learning culture.
- Empower learners by developing personalized learning plans and creating an agile learning environment in which content is easy to access and understand, and is embedded in the flow of work.
- Implement culture hacks — small, visible changes to everyday communications and meetings — to permit employees to take ownership of learning and give them time to learn.

Introduction

Organizations are struggling to attract and retain talent in today's IT labor landscape. Not having the right skills to respond to customer, business, or organizational demands is a risk for achieving enterprise outcomes. Therefore, 37% of organizations report that upskilling and reskilling is the most significant opportunity to close the talent gaps over hiring new employees (22%), consultants (13%) and outsourcing talent (14%).¹

Current methods for skills development are not fast or agile enough to keep up with the pace of change. The most common approach to skills development in IT organizations is reacting to enterprise requests for skills changes. This reactive approach often leaves IT leaders with limited options to acquire or develop the skills needed in time (see Figure 1). As a result, employees only apply 54% of the new skills they learn, because business needs have already changed by the time they are trained on these skills.²

Figure 1: Current Approaches to Skills Management Can't Keep Pace

Current Approaches to Skills Management Can't Keep Pace

At organizations with a **reactive approach**, employees only apply 54% of the new skills they learn

54%

Predictive approach is worse, resulting in employees only applying 37% of the new skills they learn

37%

Source: Gartner
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Because the reactive approach has been proven unproductive, some organizations have tried to get ahead by predicting a fixed set of future skills, then targeting their investments with preemptive development programs to prepare the workforce. Again, employees only apply 37% of the new skills, because organizations are ineffective at predicting the right skills.²

Agile learning offers an effective way for employees and enterprises to acquire new skills, thrive amid future-of-work shifts and deliver successful business outcomes. Learning faster than other organizations is the only sustainable advantage in today's talent market. However, the challenge for employees is that learning is often not easy to access or relevant to their learning needs. To foster a culture of agile learning, start by shifting the mindset of employees from waiting for learning to happen to proactively seeking learning opportunities by creating an environment that supports learning.

As CIOs, you may feel conflicted about the learning approach. You want employees to have time for development, yet are you thinking that you can't afford your best employee's time away from the job? To create an agile learning culture, you must make learning part of the job, not time away from or in addition to it.

Learning must be part of the job, not time away from it.

Analysis

Make Learning a Core Organizational Value

To change learning habits, you need to start with employees' current mindset on learning. Employees need to feel that the IT organization and its leadership supports a learning culture. Make learning a core organizational value by communicating a compelling narrative that shifts from an ad hoc learning approach — learning that is often reactive with no clear vision — to an agile one.

CIO Action: *During your next town hall or company meeting, communicate that learning will become a core organizational value. State that IT leadership will work with HR to provide the resources necessary to support employees' professional and personal growth.*

The From/To/Because (FTB) model is a tool designed to create a shared understanding of desired behavior changes in support of learning, and why those behaviors are needed. The FTB model simplifies leadership messaging about change by connecting employees to the rationale for change and the mindset shift required. The FTB model has four components:

- The tagline of the FTB model describes the mindset shift required of the organization.
- “From” is a description of the current behavioral patterns of the organization.
- “To” is the direction that the organization needs to go in the future, described as behavioral patterns.
- “Because” is why the organization needs to make the transition. Employees will be more willing to change when they understand the reason for doing so.

Common barriers to learning are time constraints, lack of motivation and unclear objectives.¹ Therefore, creating a culture of agile learning starts with defining the “why” for the change. You’re asking employees to go on a change journey with you, so they need to know why you’re embarking on it. The “because” component of the FTB model aligns the journey to the IT strategy, defines the urgency and provides context for the journey. The FTB narrative should be specific to your organization and not a generic statement describing the shift.

For example, Figure 2 shares a “because” that focuses on upskilling and reskilling to keep up with digital business demands. The “because” creates urgency for the desired mindset shift that we see in the tagline: “From ad hoc learning to agile learning.” This section should also draw an emotional response from employees by connecting why learning matters to them personally.

Figure 2: Change Learning Behaviors Using From/To/Because

Change Learning Behaviors Using From/To/Because

From	To	Because
Waiting for Learning	Seeking Out Learning	<p>Our work is becoming more digital and increasingly complex, requiring new skills to adapt to new ways of working.</p> <p>Our employees also want to be invested personally and professionally, and we're dedicated to improving the employee experience.</p> <p>Therefore, we must develop an agile learning culture that empowers our employees to grow while successfully achieving our mission.</p>
No Learning Goals	Outcome-Driven Goals	
Being Knowledgeable	Sharing Knowledge	
Individual Practicing	Collective Learning	
Scheduled Training Sessions	Just-In-Time Learning	
Finding Time to Learn	Learning Is Integrated	

Source: Gartner
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When defining the “from” position, start by observing and defining the IT organization’s current learning behaviors. Obtain information on behaviors from direct and broad observation, and from speaking with multiple stakeholders, including the management team, IT employees and business partners. Employees must change their old views about learning being a mandated practice to seeking out learning opportunities.

Not all employees will recognize that their behaviors are the ones described. Be prepared to listen to input and make this iterative. The “from” column of Figure 2 lists common behaviors that would prevent the organization from thinking and acting as a learning culture. For example, when employees think they already know everything they need to know, this thinking does not support an agile learning mindset.

Be careful not to describe the “from” behaviors negatively. Focus on how the changes to the IT organization necessitate a change in how we behave – not that those behaviors are inherently bad.

The “to” part of the change journey should describe the new set of behaviors you want employees to adopt. These behaviors will become part of the “next normal” for the organization. Every “from” behavior should have a “to” behavior to replace it. For example, Figure 2 describes how the organization should shift from waiting for learning to happen to seeking out learning opportunities.

From/To/Because Framework

Empower Learners by Creating an Agile Learning Environment

To achieve a culture of agile learning you must change the learning environment to permit employees to seamlessly learn. Organizations that are great at agile learning focus on three success factors: experiential applied learning, employee motivation, and connecting learning to strategy (see Agile Learning Manifesto).

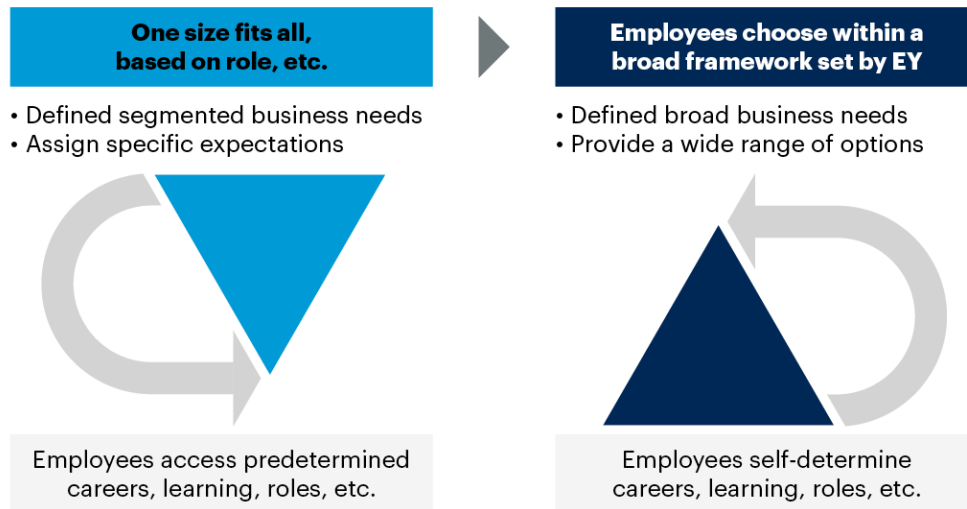
CIO Action: Empower IT employees to own their individual learning, as well as share ownership of the agile learning environment.

Co-create the Learning Experience

Personalized learning experiences make learning more relevant to IT employees. Help employees identify ways to grow to co-create learning solutions. By setting learning goals and strategically developing a plan to achieve them, your employees will be more engaged in learning. The learning experience is no longer about completing a course. It is about achieving business change and helping your employees connect learning to their impact on organizational outcomes.

EY developed “It’s Yours to Build” growth experiences to improve its ability to attract and retain talent by empowering employee choice. This model encourages employees to be curious and motivated to consume new and different experiences as part of EY’s learning culture. HR leaders at EY recognized that to provide an exceptional learning culture, they needed employees, not just HR, to be responsible for their development at the organization, shifting from a “one-size-fits-all” to “one-size-fits-one” learning approach (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: EY's Employee-Led Approach

EY's Employee-Led Approach

Source: Gartner
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Adapted From EY

Make Learning Easy to Access and Understand

Learning should also be easy to access and understand (see Table 1). Lack of employee motivation often occurs when learning is not an effortless experience. Only 44% of employees say they can find the right content for their learning needs, and less than half of employees feel that the learning content is easy to use and understand.³ Therefore, motivate employees by making learning effortless to enhance the learning experience. Adopt the following agile learning principles to make learning more accessible and consumable.

Table 1: Agile Learning Principles to Make Content Easy to Access and Understand

Agile Learning Principle ↓	Description ↓	Example ↓
Just-in-time microbursts	People learn best in short (two to 25 minute) well-designed chunks, applied immediately, then practiced regularly. Bite-size units of content unlock anytime, anywhere learning experiences that develop new skills incrementally at pace.	A software developer having on-demand access to programming modules via app or online learning platform to create a new application feature.
Flow of value delivery	Learning delivers the most impact when it's woven into people's everyday work, so that it powers their achievement of personal and business objectives. Embedded learning drives a steady stream of value delivery.	A product manager taking an integrated learning approach — simultaneously working on customer stories and learning design thinking to enhance product roadmaps.
Data-driven, AI-enabled	Technology helps match the right learning experience at the right moment with the right learners and teachers. It augments learners to stay on track and speeds them to desired outcomes. It personalizes and scales to reach everyone — try doing that in a classroom.	An IT manager using customer feedback, learner experience feedback, and demands trends to curate learning content for employees.

Agile Learning Manifesto

Apply Culture Hacks to Accelerate a Culture of Agile Learning

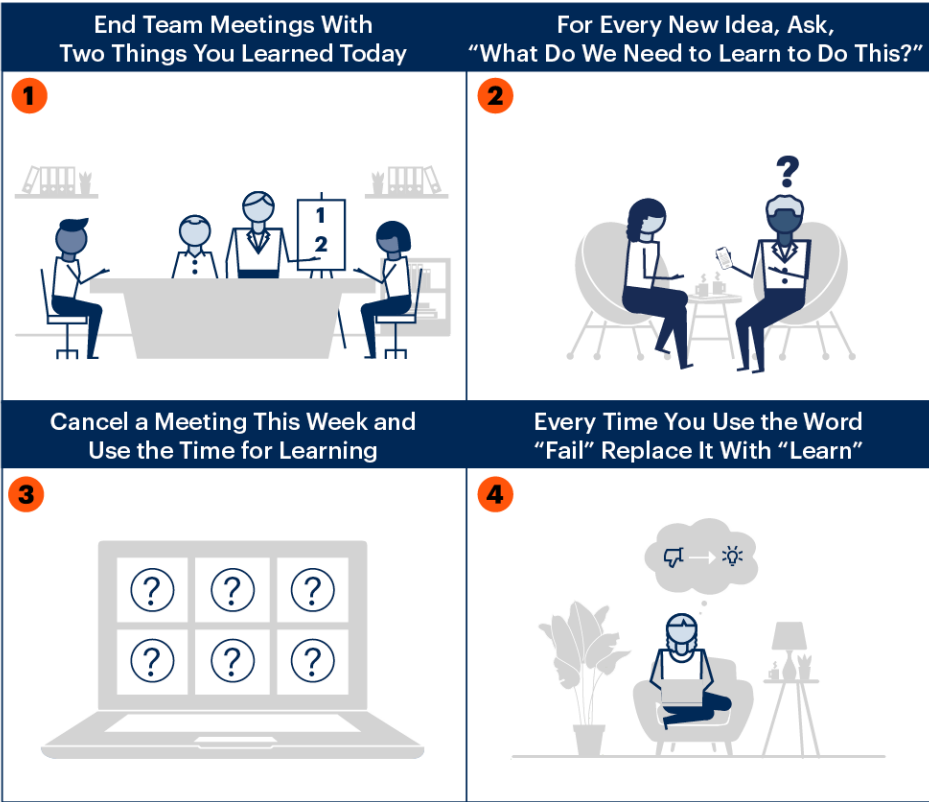
Culture hacking is a way to accelerate culture change by introducing and experimenting with learning culture practices. A culture of agile learning may seem far from reach in your organization and can lead to change fatigue for IT employees. When CIOs can break culture change down into repeatable moments or small actions, employees can hear, feel and see agile learning around them, and are more likely to change.

A culture hack is when we exploit a single point where culture is vulnerable to deep change. The idea is to change behaviors that are done repeatedly, for example how a meeting is conducted, a project is selected or decisions are made.

When designing your agile learning culture hacks, seek out and design hacks that eliminate friction — any roadblock that stands between employees and the desired culture. Two of the most fertile grounds for hacking are communication mechanisms and meetings. In Figure 4, we provide examples of hacks you can use to foster a culture of agile learning.

Figure 4: Culture Hacks You Can Use to Drive Agile Learning

Culture Hacks You Can Use to Drive Agile Learning



Source: Gartner
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Create an Internal Marketing Campaign for Learning

Employees need to feel they are part of something bigger than themselves. Make learning meaningful by creating an internal marketing campaign that encourages employees to share their experiences with others. (See Table 2 for examples of how some organizations have created marketing campaigns to foster learning cultures.)

Table 2: Internal Marketing Campaign for Learning Culture

Campaign ↓	Organization ↓	Tool ↓
"It's Yours to Build"	EY	Internal application
#IGotThis	Kellogg's	Yammer
"Each One, Teach One"	Government Agency	Internal Talent Marketplace

Adapted from EY; LinkedIn Learning; Gartner

As CIO, Be a Role Model for Learning

Lead by example. As CIO, make time for learning, instead of stating its importance. If you are engaged and dedicated to continuous learning, your actions will reinforce an agile learning culture. Role-modeling learning is a form of culture hacking, because employees tend to follow what leaders do. By learning yourself, teams will be more likely to participate in learning. Here are some culture hacks to try as an executive leader:

- Take an online course and share the learning experience with your team
- Volunteer to be an early adopter of a new capability your team is building
- Set and share your own learning goals

Encourage your leaders and managers to learn by providing early access to a learning platform (see Note 1 for examples of learning providers). This hands-on approach ultimately creates strong advocates for the program, because leaders feel they are a part of shaping the new learning culture.

Role-model learning to foster a culture of learning, and share the experience with your team.

Evidence

¹ Gartner 2020 Agile Learning Survey

² 2020 Gartner Shifting Skills Survey for HR Executives; Gartner TalentNeuron™

³ 2021 Gartner State of the Learning Culture Employee Survey

Gartner TalentNeuron™; n = 7,897,507 S&P 100 full-time/permanent job postings (1 January 2019 through 31 March 2022)

Note 1. Learning Providers

Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, Pluralsight Skills, Skillsoft, Udemy for Business

Recommended by the Authors

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Future of Work Trends: The Agile Learning Imperative

Agile Learning Manifesto

Start Organizational Change With a From/To/Because Model

The Art of Culture Hacking

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