

# Future-focused training: Are you committing learning malpractice?

No one wants a workforce with outdated skills. Most would say it makes sense to start important training now. But does it?

David Vance January 10, 2022



The temptation is strong. Over the past year, many articles, webinars and conference sessions have highlighted the need to focus on the skills your workforce will need for the future. Moreover, your CEO may be pushing you to provide learning and development to meet these future needs. After all, who wants a workforce with outdated skills? Most would say it just makes sense to start this important training now. But does it?

My answer is no, and I believe many who proceed down this path are guilty of learning malpractice.

First, it is very difficult to identify true future needs. Second, even if future needs are correctly identified, the participant cannot immediately apply their learning since the need does not exist today. This second objection cannot be overcome, and I assert any training which cannot be immediately applied is a clear case of learning malpractice. Let's examine each issue in more detail.

Identifying future skills, knowledge and behavior is hard. Very hard. First, you have to define the "future." Most writers seem to talk in terms of two to five years so let's go with that. Second, how would you go about identifying the skills needed in two to five years?

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Many of us struggle today to have productive performance consulting discussions with our stakeholders about their current performance needs. Can you imagine having this discussion about their performance needs two to five years out? Remember, we are not talking about what their employees need to be able to do today. We are talking about what new skills and knowledge they will need to meet future requirements. Most will not be able to identify new organization-specific skills needed in two to five years.

Consequently, many L&D practitioners instead rely on survey results about future skills and recommendations by consultants and vendors. You have seen these lists. They are not organization-specific and they primarily highlight soft skills like leadership, creativity, critical thinking, teaming and presentation skills; although the lists generally include a few “hard” skills like data literacy. But are these truly new skills needed for the future workforce? Aren’t these very same skills needed right now? In fact, I have not seen a generic list of “future skills” which is different from much needed “current skills”, although it is certainly possible that some organizations could identify a few specific new, hard skills.

For the sake of argument, let’s suppose we could identify skills and knowledge not needed today but very much needed in two to five years. Now we run into an insurmountable problem and that is application. As a profession we already struggle with low application rates or conversely high scrap rates. Recent research by Jack and Patti Phillips from the ROI Institute shows a scrap rate of 80 percent for learning during the pandemic. That is 80 percent — not 8 percent. Even prior to COVID, researchers were reporting scrap rates of 40 percent to 80 percent. So, even with learning, which can be applied immediately to meet an existing need, most learning today is not applied on the job.

What application rate could we expect for learning designed to meet a future need which by definition cannot be applied until some future date? The answer is simple — about 0 percent. Participants will have forgotten what they learned before they have a chance to apply it. In other words, the scrap rate will be 100 percent, and the learning will be a complete waste of time and effort. This is the very essence of learning malpractice.

In summary, identifying truly new skills and knowledge needed two to five years in the future is nearly impossible, and even if it were possible, the application rate will be 0 percent. Therefore, it is learning malpractice to provide training today to meet a need two to five years in the future. Instead, your first priority should always be to meet *today’s* needs, and here we must focus on raising the application rate. Your second priority should be to emphasize training that will become increasingly important in the *near future* which can be applied today. If you agree, let’s try to reset the conversation so we have greater clarity and transparency about what we can and cannot realistically accomplish.

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