

Chapter 4

Charting a Future With Skills: The Need for a Skills–Based Education and Hiring Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

Navigating life and charting a path towards educational goals and professional advancement is challenging in troubled water. When structures and trusted tools previously relied on begin to falter, chaos can beset those on the journey. Therefore, innovation and new ideas must be championed and tested to develop a greater sense of the possible and to provide unique and tailored solutions to everyone. The authors advise the adoption of the Diamond of Interoperability, a set of four principal statements—open skills, open achievements, open records, open pathways—to support the workforce development needed for the future of work. These ideas are rooted in transparency, collaboration, transformation, and interoperable technology to provide answers to the current challenges in education and hiring in the turbulent waters of the 21st century economy.

In the beginning of navigation, early humans did not venture too deep into the open water or stray far from land. They kept the shore in sight and traveled primarily along coastlines, using landmarks to gauge their progress and position. Traditional hiring and education clings to these same ways of early navigation. These methods and well-worn pathways have proven they are successful, but what happens when the storm of change approaches, the trusted landmarks fade, and the well plotted routes lose their relevance in the face of greater needs and more targeted desires? How is the journey of a life charted? Through constellations made of skills, these are the stars that will guide new explorers.

As we emerge from the latest health and economic crises, the flaws in our talent supply chain have become increasingly more apparent. While employers are looking for the most efficient path to hiring a skilled and diverse workforce, they are also struggling to define and identify the right talent, even though

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in many cases, it is right in front of them, yet somehow unseen. Learners struggle to communicate the skills they have demonstrated as part of their learning journey leading to a communication gap that makes it difficult for employers to find skilled talent (Carroll, 2017). Meanwhile, individuals who have gained in-demand skills through education and on the job experience, do not understand the marketability of those skills and are unable to communicate their value in any meaningful way beyond that of transcripts and credential attainment. Individuals also do not have a way to reflect and share the skills that they are learning on their path to credential attainment, resulting in potentially missed opportunities where they could have leveraged their skills earlier in their career path. To further exacerbate the issue, education and training providers are frequently siloed in their approach to designing and delivering their offerings and are either not aligned to workforce need or their course outcomes do not make resulting skill attainment clear to consumers. As more non-degree credential offerings flood the job market, employers are growing increasingly perplexed as to the value of both the credential and the individual credential holders (Whissemore, 2022). As a result, there is a disconnected and floundering ecosystem of talent that is leaving many stranded, especially those in underserved and overlooked populations. All of this while the skills gaps and communication gaps between employers and individuals continue to widen (Wiley, 2019). There needs to be a better solution that will benefit all.

So why skills and why now? There are several shifts in the talent supply chain that have been underway but are now accelerating as the pandemic timeline continues to evolve. Employers are struggling to find and hire the right skilled individuals. A recent report from the Harvard Business School reveals that companies are increasingly desperate for workers. As they continue to struggle to find people with the skills they need, their competitiveness and growth prospects are put in jeopardy (Fuller, 2021). As the economy continues to recover, it will intensify the struggle to find talent. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' December 2021 jobs report, the number of job openings (10.9 million) is outpacing the number of unemployed individuals (6.3 million). Current events have only hastened what has been occurring for years—a continued widening in the skills gap.

There are several factors driving this divergence. First is the acceleration of new and complex skills. According to a 2018 report from the World Economic Forum, they estimate that approximately 42% of the skills in demand for jobs across all industries will change between 2018 and 2022. The 2020 Jobs Report from the World Economic Forum finds the trends continuing only faster and further on that path. According to a Gartner analysis of more than 7.5 million U.S. job postings in 2018, those in IT, finance, and sales roles required an average of 17 skills (Wilde, 2021). The same types of roles now require an average of 21 skills, including at least eight that were not previously required. At the same time, 29% of the skills from an average job posting in 2018 may not be needed next year (Wilde, 2021). How can a person keep up?

In addition to escalating complexity and ever-changing skills, employers increasingly rely on degrees as a proxy for professional and enduring skills. Sometimes called “soft” skills or “21st Century” skills, these are the essential interpersonal human skills. As can be seen in a recent Emsi report, they are some of the top in-demand skills (Oldham, 2022). Yet, in this knowledge-based economy, college degrees continue to have weight and significance. The Education Trust estimates that 65% of jobs required a minimum of a bachelor's degree in 2020, up from 28% in 1973 (Nichols, 2017). The college path is also increasingly rewarded as those who hold a bachelor's degree or higher earn almost \$1 million more over their lifetime than those high school graduates who do not pursue the college route (Abdelal, 2021).

However, this reliance on what has always been the expected path—degrees—is a profound and deeply rooted mindset and experience that is making the U.S. labor market more inefficient. Job postings that

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