



Future Skills

What we need to know in the 2020s

The skills of the future are centred around growth and flexibility. As we've seen, change can be sudden and unexpected, as in COVID and the 2008 financial crisis. Or it can be gradual and predictable, like climate change. Leaders just need the skills to be able to change the way they think and work according to what the future holds

In this paper we show why change is at the heart of Future Skills. Then we outline the ways that professional development can help to produce the leaders required for the terrain ahead.

Change

The leaders of the future need to be **actively seeking out the next change** they themselves need to make¹.

Why's that important? Because change is accelerating and arriving from all directions.

Below are some of the main types of change we're already dealing with and will see more of in the future.

¹ 'The pace of economic change all but guarantees that a single degree started in your teens, or a career picked in your 20s will not be everlasting.' Commit To Lifelong Learning & Reskilling. Pearson | [The Future of Skills](#)

Political & Economic Change

This includes events like Brexit, upheaval in Hong Kong and the Trump Administration. To some extent these are baked in now, but something else will doubtless soon arrive to make waves. Anticipating the disruptions and opportunities up ahead is not the main consideration. The point is to **be prepared for change generally** – not any specific change.

There have been 25 cases of democratic breakdown since 2000. To quote the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace – ‘*Countries are as frequently moving away from democracy as toward it, and more often moving into conflict than out of it. The global era of political change that commenced several decades ago is now about change that involves an almost bewilderingly diverse array of starting points, directions, halfway houses side alleys and end points.*’

Nature

Recently, we’ve seen a sudden pandemic. And although climate change is gradual, some of its effects strike with little warning, such as extreme weather. Our densely populated and highly connected planet is less stable than the one our ancestors operated in. Labour, supply chains, and political stability may become affected. Workforces may suffer extreme stress or upheaval. But in business it’s essential we know how **to cope with major external shifts and crises**.

Tech & Culture

Social Media, Crypto-currency, Extinction Rebellion, BLM, the Me Too Movement – all these are examples of how human **thought and behaviour can pivot sharply** in ways organisations may need to take rapid account of.

Of course, these three drivers of change do not act independently. They *interact*, making the picture far too complex to accurately predict. For example, the Green Economy is creating more jobs than are being lost in the polluting industries, yet this in turn is being driven by changes in demographics and urbanisation brought about by government policy. Therefore, to achieve success in an unpredictable environment requires the **survival of the most adaptable**. People and organisations must be *built for change* – ready for whatever the future throws up next.

To cope with the ongoing changes in the world around us and make the most of the opportunities they hopefully present, we must constantly be aware and ready to respond. That means **fundamentally changing our own perceptions and outlook**

Two Kinds of Change

When we consider how people and organisations respond to major change, we find they tend to do this in two main ways.

The first is *growth*. This means evolving and developing in the light of new experience. So called “Action Logic” is a good example of this and reveals how individuals evolve to interpret the meaning of the world around them.

The second is *flexibility*. This means having different ways of working and being able to toggle between them to suit the moment.

How can people learn to get good at change?

Learning To Change

The learning can be split into *beliefs* and *techniques*.

Revising our beliefs gives us the understanding and the motivation to **upgrade our performance to fit new circumstances**. For example, people need to believe that an inclusive workplace is more productive and resilient when times become turbulent.

Techniques are the **new patterns of behaviour or abilities that will improve outcomes**. For example, we can make the team more inclusive by running meetings and maintaining relationships in the right way.

But it's a rapidly evolving picture. A third of the skills considered essential today will have changed by 2024². By 2030, you may be in a job that doesn't even exist yet³. Whether or not these predictions turn out to be accurate, everyone peering into the future sees the same things: disruption, innovation, realignment, reconfiguring – all at pace. Professional development adds most value when it **enables people to grow and flex**. And there's remarkable agreement about the skills needed to flourish in that landscape.

What The Future Skills Are

Of The World Economic Forum's *Top 10 Skills for 2025*⁴, eight of the ten are classified as Problem-Solving, Self-Management or Working With People. (The other two concern coping with Tech.) At Working Voices the terms we use are: **Thinking, Psychological and Social**.

The crucial point is this: there's a massive need for **awareness and ability in these areas**. We don't need to be experts, but we do need to be well-informed and familiar with the perspectives offered by the experts in these fields – and capable of staying abreast of new ideas.

Thinking

We live in an information age. Experts abound, opinions are shared constantly and the information and data we must deal with is overwhelming. The challenge is in trying to *manage* the ubiquitous knowledge coming at us from all sides all the time. We now live in a post-knowledge era, where the knowledge isn't as important as **how we gather and employ it**

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bernardmarr/2019/04/29/the-10-vital-skills-you-will-need-for-the-future-of-work/>

³ <https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/careers-advice/future-skills-youll-need-your-career-2030>

⁴ Kate Whiting, for World Economic Forum, Oct 2020

Effective Thinking means filtering and interpreting that information to make decisions, solve problems, use frameworks and anticipate logical errors. As well as logic, we need to understand the valuable role of intuition, creativity and emotion – when to trust and when to be wary of them.

“21st Century skills are the key to success in a modern, knowledge driven society. Critical thinking is important not only at work where problem solving is essential, but in any social setting where making the correct decision is required. Additionally, creativity helps ensure that the outcomes of critical thinking can be culturally ingenious and treasured. Critical thinking and creativity require the individual to be present and focused, and that in turn requires grit. Grit should be considered an essential element of mental processing that activates and/or directs behaviour and action.”

[Taking critical thinking, creativity and grit online.](#)

Psychology

Automation has been growing for a century and will keep growing. But if anything, the need to understand humans must grow with it because we increasingly have humans doing things that only humans can do⁵. Treating people like machines belongs to the age when humans were used for tasks that we now have robots and computers to perform. All lingering traces of that mentality need to be cast aside and replaced with **a psycho-literate approach** – where decisions consider the whole person and what makes them tick.

Leaders will need a firm understanding of the basics of psychology: what motivates us, shuts us down or lights us up. Far too often people cling to outdated popular ideas or unfounded prejudices rather than developing a knowledge of **the paths and patterns that human behaviour tends to follow**. Some of these patterns are common to almost all of us, while some are the key differences between personality types. Knowing the difference is powerful.

[Pandemics: Implications for research and practice in industrial and organisational psychology](#)

offers the scope and depth of psychological understanding necessary to navigate through work-related processes and leadership. Pandemics have historically shaped the world of work in various ways.

Social

How people interact in organisations, teams, families and communities is a key to understanding productivity, loyalty, wellbeing and leadership. By understanding the principles of human interaction, we can **increase the choices available to us to manage others** – wisely and effectively.

Lockdowns across the world have thrown into sharp relief the necessity for natural social interaction. We now have an opportunity to shine a light on this area of work.

⁵ ‘Although the advance of automation and artificial intelligence may feel like a losing battle to some, individuals will need to focus on developing the uniquely human skills identified in this research, such as originality, fluency of ideas, and active listening.’ ‘Develop Skills That Are Uniquely Human’, Pearson, [The Future Of Skills](#)

In-office mingling will be reduced in most workplaces for now but will continue in some form. Leaders need to understand how **social interaction boosts productivity and well-being** so they can ensure it's happening and not just assume it is. They also need to appreciate how the altered interface between work and family interaction now plays an important part in the future of working.

[How Hard Is It to Learn?](#)

The good news is *all these skills are learnable*. And the science is accessible and practical. For example, it's easy enough to understand the difference between an introvert and an extrovert, and the best way to integrate each into a hybrid working environment. Up to now it just hasn't been seen as essential to be able to do this.

The even better news is that we have most of these skills anyway. Creativity, critical thinking, inclusion – we all have these innate capabilities. In many cases the mission is simply to understand how best to unlock them.

MAIN SOURCES & READING:

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<https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2020/digest>

Future Of Skills, Pearson/Nesta/Oxford Martin School

<https://futureskills.pearson.com/#/homescreen>

Next Skills

<https://nextskills.org/>