

New skilling for growth

Making big bets on the future
of innovation and learning



Accenture Strategy

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Sometimes the cause of disruption also contains the seeds of its solution.

This is the case today as companies wrestle with the implications of new, intelligent technologies—artificial intelligence, machine learning, automation, and more—on their people and their talent strategy. Forty-three percent of executives surveyed by Accenture anticipate that in the next three years more than 60 percent of their workforce will move into new roles requiring substantial reskilling due to the impact of technology. This compares to 17 percent who see that significant an impact today.¹

With the business and technology landscape changing so rapidly, how can people keep up?

Already, right now, the workforce is not able to continuously refresh the knowledge and skill levels needed to capitalize on new challenges and opportunities. Learning programs at most organizations still offer static courses, often in a classroom setting, with an emphasis is on activity tracking and compliance—ticking a box that says a particular course has been completed. It is, at best, an analog remnant in a digital world.

What's better? Turning the challenge on its head and using machine learning and artificial intelligence solutions to proactively offer the workforce an entirely new, future-oriented learning experience across devices and channels—one that is customized, dynamic and predictive.

Using artificial intelligence to capitalize on the exploding amount of available data can provide personalized, role-based and competency-based learning and performance support in near-real-time, at scale across the organization—something that Accenture calls “new skilling.”

The implications are revolutionary: a workforce that can adapt readily to anything thrown its way. You can't after all, have an agile business without an agile workforce.

From incrementalism to innovation

Business leaders know that thriving in the digital age requires them to take on the disruptive forces changing their industry with speed, confidence and bold new bets. Nothing less than a similarly bold approach to new skilling will prepare the workforce to support an organization's need for continuous innovation and growth.

This is a far cry from much of traditional enterprise learning that tends to focus on monitoring, compliance and activity tracking. Enhancements are incremental in nature and constrained by existing approaches. By contrast, new skilling programs are driven by innovation—aligned with dynamic business objectives and designed to improve business performance.

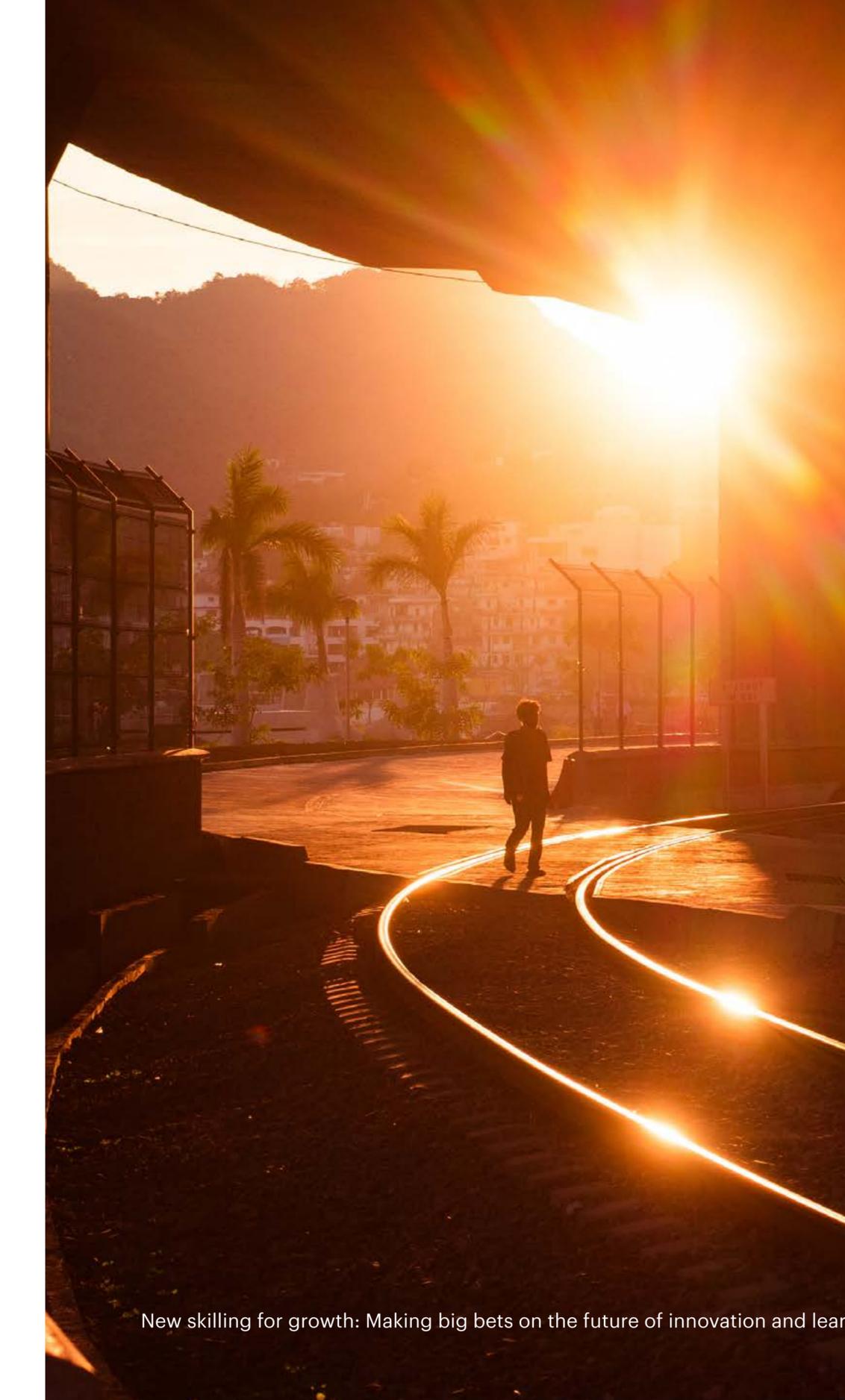
By adopting a zero-based mindset, leading companies can take a clean-sheet approach to redesigning the learning organization with clear objectives in mind—for example, reducing time to implementation and improving speed to competency. Resources can be shifted from initiatives that aren't contributing to desired business outcomes, to ones that will.

Consider US telecom provider AT&T, which found itself facing a skills gap when it came to technology. The company lacked sufficient talent in areas such as cloud-based computing and data science. To close the gap, AT&T launched "Workforce 2020." If it succeeds, by 2020 AT&T will have reeducated 100,000 employees for new jobs with cutting-edge skills and, in the process, created the kind of nimble workforce it needs to compete in the 21st century. According to the company, employees that are currently retraining are two times more likely to be hired into one of these newer, mission-critical jobs and four times more likely to make a career advancement.³

"Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men's blood... Make big plans; aim high in hope and work."

Architect Daniel Burnham²



A person is walking on a path at sunset. The path is illuminated by glowing orange lines that curve along the ground. The background shows a cityscape and palm trees under a bright, hazy sky.

From cost center to competitive advantage

Recent Accenture research has found that high-growth companies are over three times more likely than laggards to invest in creating a talent-rich business—building competitive advantage through flexible, augmented and adaptive workforces.⁴ Learning is no longer simply a sunk cost. Now, it's a path to competitive differentiation.

Organizations can use employee data to “know” the current tasks and responsibilities of individual workers, understand their educational background and competency levels, factor in the company's strategic goals, and proactively suggest learning opportunities that help people prepare for roles—both today and tomorrow.

These hyper-personalized learning paths are enabled through predictive analytics, AI and the inexpensive computing power of the cloud.

Companies can use an increasingly vast amount of data to build a rich, digital representation of each employee—creating better learning that improves relevance and heightens the impact for each individual.⁵

One caveat: Using employee data for either current or future roles is complicated. Based on our research, about half of organizations' workforces have concerns about data collection. However, 61 percent of workers would be willing to have technology collect data about them and their work in exchange for more customized learning and development opportunities.⁶

Responsible leaders will develop their learning programs in a way that builds trust in how data is collected and used, and that focuses on outcomes that benefit employees as well as the business.

From vinyl to Spotify: You [can] always get what you want

Consider people who grew up listening to music on LPs or CDs, but who can now stream music using a service that monitors their preferences and then predicts additional music likely to match those preferences. In much the same way, high-growth companies will reinvent themselves to deliver more personalized employee learning experiences based on roles, job profiles and competency-based assessments.

Increasingly, informal learning opportunities—often on mobile devices—will supplant formal, classroom training. According to the “70/20/10” rule for the learner experience (see Figure 1), companies should emphasize on-the-go learning, followed by lower percentages of social and formal learning.

A key here is to leverage delivery platforms and content ecosystems to broaden the knowledge and support available to workers, and then machine learning such that your learning systems adapt to the changing needs of workers.

Savvy organizations will use relevant ecosystems—physical and virtual networks—to deliver valuable skills training, generate insights, and enable access to potential new roles and projects that can enable applied learning—learning all the time and on-the-go. These networks ultimately allow companies to rapidly tap into new sources of knowledge and experience when they’re needed. For example, LinkedIn’s educational platform supports point-of-need desktop learning. JOLT is an online marketplace that offers companies access to virtual and video-based learning delivered by recognized industry professionals on a variety of topics, providing just-in-time “jolts” of skills-building to individuals and teams when and where needed.⁷

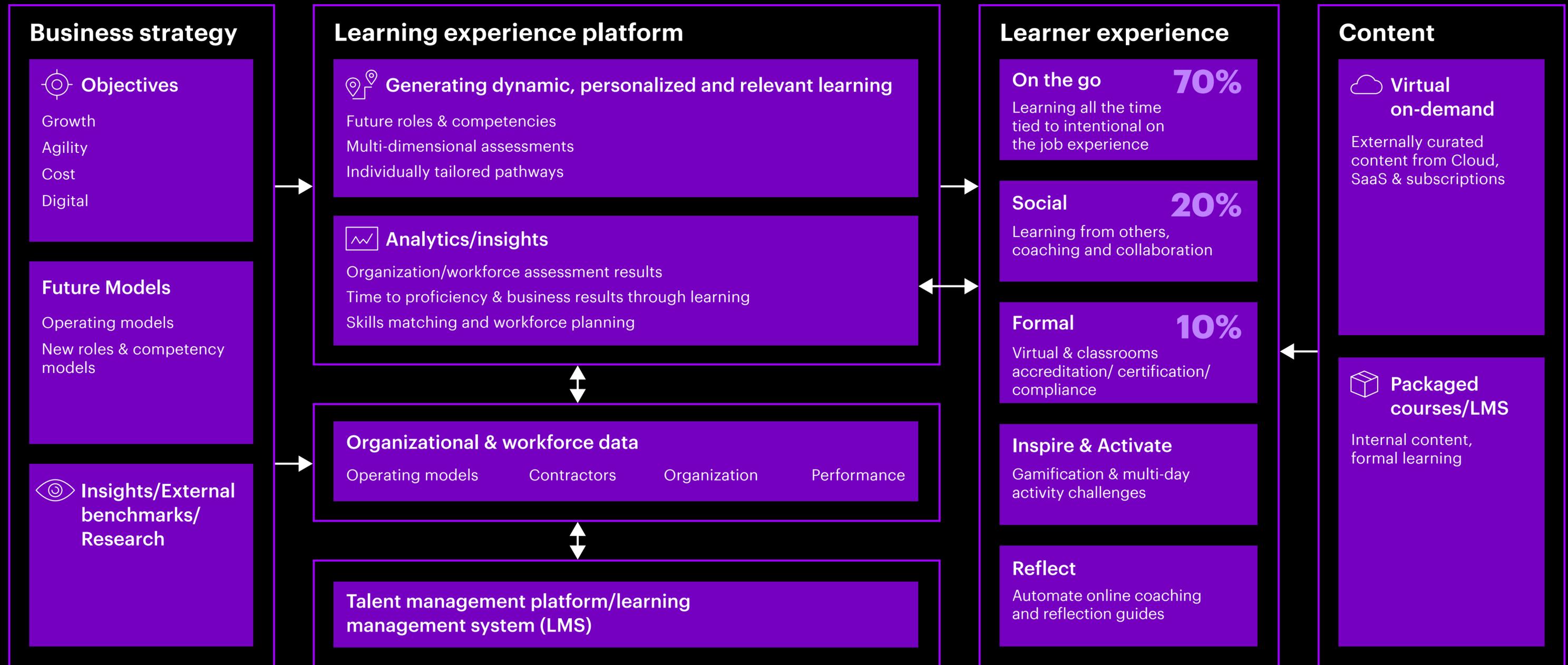
Yet, a traditional enterprise learning function cannot, by itself, understand each worker’s rapidly evolving needs and then provide immediate and relevant new-skilling opportunities. Here, artificial intelligence technologies offer guidance by understanding employee profiles and then matching an employee’s situation to available learning.

Such learning can be provided by an organization, or its ecosystem of partners, or from an instantaneous analysis of relevant content from an organization’s internal collaboration and knowledge-sharing system—that is, learning from peers. In turn, machine learning technologies can then help training and collaboration systems evolve to match the changing needs of workers.



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Figure 1: New skilling integrates business strategy, data, learner experiences and content to deliver hyper-personalized learning linked to business outcomes



Source: Accenture Strategy, 2019

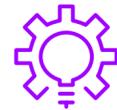
New skilling: Making it happen

Working with the “what” and the “why” of long-term strategic thinking is a skill many executives have honed. But fewer have developed ways to think effectively about the “how”—the future job roles and competency models necessary to turn strategic ideas into results. When considering your own new-skilling program, keep the following points in mind.



Create individually tailored learning paths using Big Data and analytics.

This will involve co-creating learning solutions in concert with the business, HR, academia and employees themselves, as well as an ecosystem that can be a source, and also a channel, for learning. Artificial intelligence can help keep these learning paths fresh and relevant.



Develop preliminary prototypes and proofs of concept focused on AI-enabled learning and test them.

Let the winners move on to be scaled across a geography or business unit before a global implementation. You may well find that your IT department has already been testing AI and machine learning solutions to improve the customer experience. In many cases, some of those methods and technologies can be applicable to the employee learning experience.



Build trust with employees by using data in an ethical and responsible way.

For example, generating personalized recommendations that support learning and professional growth, rather than using data primarily for individual performance assessment. A responsible approach will strengthen the resilience and agility of workforces and help CEOs navigate disruption at a time of intense competition and volatility.



Consider enterprise metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of learning and the workforce of the future.

This involves a move from a cost-center mindset about learning to an enterprise mindset. The entire enterprise is now a source of learning (and its beneficiary), so determining ROI on learning investments needs to operate in that broader reality. When learning is focused on business outcomes, measuring progress may now well include enterprise metrics such as numbers of patents filed, speed to bring innovations to market, and even how customer satisfaction and retention have been influenced.

The promise of intelligent technologies for the future workforce

Big bets on learning are now urgent. It's not enough to deliver the same old content in new ways. Artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies offer the promise of game-changing talent strategies that meet the needs of businesses and their people today, and also prepare them for tomorrow.

By adopting new skilling approaches, leading organizations can support today's workforce needs, while evolving to meet the new opportunities ahead.



Reach out to our authors to see how a new approach to reskilling can drive innovation and growth.

Get in touch

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